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HOIST WITH HER OWN PETARD.

VOL. II.

HOIST WITH HER OWN PETARD

BY

REGINALD LUCAS

Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days
of the life of thy vanity for that is thy portion in
this life.—*Ecclesiastes ix, 9.*

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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HOIST WITH HER OWN PETARD.

CHAPTER I.

JACK PREPARES TO LEAVE HOME.

SIR JOHN BALSTOUN sat in the room which is to be found in every English house and yet has no satisfactory name. It is generally called the library or the study; as a rule it is not a library; and if it were, its owner would not do much studying there. If one talks of a man's room, one naturally suggests his bed-room. Sanctum is not English: den is vulgar; besides, a man

need not be a wild animal because he sits alone. He has his room where he can write his letters, keep his papers, and smoke his pipe secure from interruption. Such a retreat—which is the best word that comes to hand—had Sir John. We have already had two scenes there; he transacts all his important business in this room, so it is not surprising that I, who tell the tale, refer to it often.

This morning he is sitting before the massive oak table with its locked drawers. It is as orderly as that of a cabinet minister. The silver-mounted inkstand is shining and spotless; the pens, pencils, wax, knife, and scissors, are ranged like a company of Grenadiers for precision. Whitaker's Almanack, the Army List, Ruff's Guide, the Agricultural Year Book, are within reach. His boxes stand in the nearest corner. The book-shelves rise from

the floor to a height of four feet, and on the top a modest collection of curios is set out. The pictures are mostly of a sporting character; but they include some water-colour drawings done by a brother officer in the Crimea, and a very beautiful portrait in crayons of his dead wife.

Sir John wears his gravest air, and he is confronted by Mr. Tracer, the agent, to whom frequent allusion has been made; an old gentleman with white hair and an out of date style of dress. He has grown old in the service of the family, and occupies in a way the position of confidential adviser. He rather admired Sir John for his unbending character, but he had never been able to love him. It was to the business-side of his nature that the Baronet appealed; not to the emotional. They worked well together, for they understood one another. Mr. Tracer never looked for

favour or gratitude, but he was free from awe, and always said what he meant.

‘I have had a communication from Mrs. Dasent,’ he said, in a quiet, business-like tone. ‘She is in a hurry to go away, for private reasons. She would like to get out of her lease if possible; if not, she wants permission to sublet.’ Sir John made no sign, and Mr. Tracer went on. ‘I told her I did not see any way to the first, but you would probably not object to the latter, provided she found a suitable person.’

‘Quite so,’ said Sir John.

‘I am sorry she wants to go; she is a good tenant and a pleasing lady. As to sub-letting, that is her affair; you needn’t disturb yourself.’

Sir John took up his erasing-knife, and cut three long lines in the blotting-paper. Having achieved this important end, he

took a blue pencil and traced each line with care. It appeared to interest him, for his face was solemn. As a matter of fact, he was debating seriously. Mr. Tracer had only followed tradition when he refrained from suggesting indulgence towards the young widow. Sir John was under no obligation to assist her; Mr. Tracer had no notion of proposing such a thing. He recited the facts as he would have done with a transaction in stocks: Sir John ought to have acquiesced at once. But we are none of us infallible. Sir John was opposed on principle to sentiment; he suffered still from touches of indignation, and was not by any means in a giving mood; but he was not entirely devoid of heart. Mrs. Dasent had offended him, had given him anxiety, but again he was mindful of the fact that he had asked her to marry him, and this deserved recognition

at his hands. He was at a loss for excuse in Mr. Tracer's eyes. It would never do to say simply, 'Let her off; make things smooth for her.' It would give a shock to the estate management from which it might permanently suffer. Therefore he mangled his blotting-pad, and felt himself a hypocrite.

'I shouldn't be sorry, Tracer,' he said, 'to have that house on my hands. I am sorry Mrs. Dasent is going; she is a very agreeable neighbour, as you say, but I have felt more than once that it would be convenient to have the place at my disposal, to lend to my friends. If she has decided to go, make any arrangement you like. I am prepared to sacrifice the rent.'

Mr. Tracer was astonished, but he noted his instructions in silence.

'Now, Sir John,' he continued, when this was done, 'I want to know about Mr.

Jack. Is he really bent on this adventure?’

‘I believe he is,’ said the Baronet, absently.

‘But it appears to me a very mad business.’

‘So it is.’

‘Have you given your consent?’ enquired the agent, with deference.

‘It hasn’t been asked for,’ said Sir John.

The agent waited. It was clear there was something amiss, and he was debating how far he could prudently go towards investigating it. Sir John did not as a rule offer explanations; however, he broke the silence.

‘The truth is this, Tracer, and I wish you to make use of it: my son chooses to go and live like an aboriginal savage, instead of an English gentleman. He is of age; he has his allowance; he can spend

his time and money in any place or manner he likes, as long as he does not commit an act calculated to degrade himself or his family. As soon as he transgresses fair limits, I shall stop him; till then I have nothing to do with his affairs.'

An answer was apparently expected, so Mr. Tracer said,

'Can't he be dissuaded?'

'I don't know, I am sure,' said Sir John.

'I haven't tried.'

'But haven't you pointed out the folly of what he is doing?'

'I said I thought it was contemptible; that was merely my opinion.'

Mr. Tracer rubbed his chin despondently.

'He has been to me about his plans,' he said. 'It will require organization to carry them out. I could help him: possibly I might hinder him. I should like to be guided by you.'

‘My dear Tracer, I tell you I have nothing to do with it.’

‘For example,’ said Tracer, ‘Matthew Taylor has given notice; he wants to go with him. Am I to let him go? He is an excellent fellow.’

‘He can do as he likes. What is his engagement?’

‘It is not definite: you pay him so much a month, but he is practically free. It is an arrangement with his father.’

‘Then he can do as he likes. Pay him up to the day he leaves.’

‘Mr. Jack spoke of taking some things to stock his place; carpenters’ and foresters’ tools, and so on. What about that?’

‘Certainly not. He can take whatever belongs to him: nothing of mine.’

‘It will be a business setting up there,’ the agent went on. ‘I shouldn’t care to rough it like that. Some one ought to

look into it, or they will kill themselves as likely as not.'

Sir John frowned.

'There is a risk of that every time one rides or drives,' he said.

'I am in great doubt,' Mr. Tracer said, after some time. 'I think the idea foolish: I cannot well raise objections, unless you do. I don't even know how to argue with him. May I venture to ask if there is a reason?'

Sir John was not annoyed at the question.

'I don't suppose a man does anything without a reason—a reason in his own eyes, at all events. Jack, no doubt, has a reason; but I don't profess to understand young men who go in for these things. I take them as I find them, and try to get accustomed to the new order.'

He spoke deliberately, and Mr. Tracer

saw that, whatever the Baronet knew, he meant to keep to himself.

Jack, meanwhile, had seriously set about his task. The first thing requisite was to find a desert island. Careful examination of an atlas revealed the existence of numerous specks of land round the British coast, not generally known. On the whole, he inclined towards a northern situation: a certain sympathy seemed to exist between his own mind and the rugged north. The Cornish coast had its advantages: the early spring, from all accounts, must be glorious in those regions abounding in wild flowers; but they were becoming too well known, and there would be the danger of intrusive tourists. The west coast of Scotland offered many a foothold, but the tourist plague there would be inevitable. It was no good retiring from society only

to fall a prey to the travelling public. He followed the coast as far as the north-east extremity of Scotland, and here he found traces of land apparently uninhabited. Tides and seasons had to be considered, and Jack turned out every book in the library in which there was any chance of reading about the climate of Scotland. He read articles on the gulf stream in three encyclopædias, and discussed the information he gleaned with Matthew Taylor. Upon the whole, it seemed a favourable choice, and Jack put himself into communication with the landlord, who lived not far from John o' Groats. This gentleman wrote back in evident perplexity ; he seemed to doubt the sanity of his correspondent. Jack's first proposal had been to buy an island outright, provided it proved suitable ; but to this the owner declined to agree. Jack explained that his object

was to make his home there, and live as a recluse : that he had no sinister designs, and was not likely to be a troublesome neighbour. The owner replied that if this was his object he might take a lease of the place ; the rent would not be high, and he was not likely to be disturbed in his tenancy. Jack then went north to reconnoitre, taking Matthew with him. They arrived at Wick in fair weather, and had no difficulty in securing a sailing-boat to take them over.

The boatman had little to tell them about the island : it was called Windlaw ; no one lived there ; no one ever went there, so far as he knew. Jack peered forward across the blue waters to a black strand a couple of miles away. As it came into view and assumed a definite shape, he realised the audacity of what he was doing. He had begun with a sentimental

dream ; he was confronted now with a big fact. Matthew Taylor sat plucking at his beard with his head a little on one side : whatever may have been his master's misgivings, there was clearly no lack of enterprise in his mind, this was something like an adventure. They skirted the island in search of a landing place, and were enabled thus to take in its proportions. It measured nowhere above a quarter of a mile in diameter : towards the north it rose considerably, and on the higher ground stood a belt of fir-trees.

There was not much sign of vegetation ; a thick scrub covered the entire surface. There was a certain amount of life visible. A flock of gulls rose from the beach at the sight of visitors, and went wheeling slowly round them, indignant and inquisitive : but Matthew Taylor observed with satisfaction that there was a permanent bird colony

piping cheerfully beyond. They landed and walked round the domain in silence. They mounted the high ground and looked about them. The mainland was obscured by a haze ; on all other sides lay the infinite sea and sky. The gulls swept to and fro, and the boat rocked so gently on the light waves, that its occupant was already sound asleep. There was no other living thing to be seen ; it was certainly lonely : apparently it would do.

‘ Well, Matt,’ said Jack, at last, ‘ what do you think of it ?’

‘ It ain’t very large, Mr. Jack.’

‘ Quite large enough,’ said Jack. ‘ If you like to cultivate all that part of it I expect you’ll find it as much as you can do ;’ and he pointed to a level, open space.

‘ It isn’t that, sir. I shall be busy enough if I’m to be cook and housemaid,

and all besides. I'm thinking about you. Won't you find it wonderful dull after what you have been accustomed to at home.'

Jack laughed.

'I thought of that to begin with. One doesn't go to a place like this if one wants to be lively.'

Matthew said nothing, and Jack went on.

'Consider well before you decide. I have made up my mind to come and live here: you can guess what sort of life it will be, it is my affair as to how I am going to occupy myself. What you have to decide is, whether you care to separate yourself from everybody for an indefinite time.'

Matthew drew his fingers through his brown beard, and looked down shyly.

'What I think, sir, is this. It don't

seem natural for you to be doing things such as this. Why you do it, isn't my business : but seeing as you mean to be settling here, why, I'm ready and glad to come and keep you company.'

They sailed back to Wick, where Jack stayed several days. He saw the owner of Windlaw, and proposed in an impetuous way to take it on a lease of twenty-one years. The landlord gave him a comical look. It was clear to him that he was becoming a party to a queer transaction, and he hardly liked the prospect. He said he thought a yearly tenancy would be better ; but Jack was so full of determination, that he would hear of nothing less than a three years' agreement ; upon which they eventually came to terms. Jack was to have the right of building himself a house and doing what he liked with the place, provided he cut down no

trees without good and sufficient reason. He saw a contractor, and gave him an order for a house. It was to be a portable iron structure, with two bed-rooms, two sitting-rooms, the latter to serve as a dining-room and Matthew's room in one. There was to be a bath-room, but no effort at luxury : everything as simple as possible.

He went in for a domestic education, with a view to avoiding uncomfortable discoveries. He didn't want to find his house would not 'work,' because some detail of economy had been overlooked.

His story got put about and created some stir. People came in numbers to see the mad young gentleman : but he cared very little. Tradesmen took their orders none the less willingly because they were unusual ; and preparations went forward. Jack and his henchman paid several

visits to their future home; they made great schemes for beautifying it, and grew impatient of delay: Matthew Taylor wanted to begin gardening forthwith.

Jack finally bought a yacht; he must, of course, have some means of communicating with the shore. Then he went home, leaving Matthew to keep the builders to their work.

Sir John Balstoun received his son as complacently as if they had met on friendly terms an hour before. He asked no questions and expected no information. It was late in the day, and they had little time for talking before dinner. Sir John was standing by the window when Jack came down, and he began to speak about the hay crop. His volubility was evidently forced, and his voice had the strained ring which makes nervousness contagious. Miss Mirabel looked as hand-

some as ever, and was cordiality itself towards Jack. He was fidgetting about the room, wondering how the evening would pass, when she appeared, and her frank smile certainly brought a sense of relief. Sir John stopped his lecture and turned round. She went up and gave him a gardenia for his coat. Her bearing was a curious mixture of modesty and ease; the deference of an ex-governess, and the assurance of a person who knows her offices are acceptable. Sir John sniffed at the scented flower: then put it in his button-hole.

Jack remarked that this ceremony was accompanied by a curt 'Thank you,' but an eminently appreciative recognition. They were apparently becoming good friends these two.

'I brought one for you as well,' she said, turning to Jack. 'They are beau-

tiful flowers, are they not? You must go all over the gardens to-morrow: they are quite wonderful—I never saw anything like the begonias in the shrubbery garden. Really I shall be able to lecture on botany very soon; it will be such an advantage when I have to turn governess again,’ and she gave a pretty laugh. ‘Here is a letter from Agatha,’ she went on, as the butler announced dinner.

She had probably timed this deliberately. It would be such a boon to have a substantial topic of interest to start them, and Agatha’s long epistle certainly answered the purpose finely. Sir John blessed the woman opposite him for keeping an easy bearing on what threatened to be so stiff. His face fell when she rose to go.

‘We had better have our coffee here, I suppose,’ he said. ‘I have had it in

the music-room lately,' he added, for Jack's benefit; 'I got tired of sitting alone.'

'Let us go there, by all means,' said Jack, with alacrity: he had no desire to be left with his father. 'Haven't you had anyone here?' he asked. 'I thought you expected some people?'

'They couldn't come,' said the Baronet. 'I've been alone—or rather we have, Miss Mirabel and I.'

She had not come into the music-room with them, and Jack wondered what generally happened after dinner. He could not remember these two people being left together in the house on any previous occasion: it suddenly struck him as an odd situation.

'What is going to happen to Miss Mirabel?' he asked. 'She said something about

becoming a governess again—is she going to leave here?’

Sir John looked rather surprised.

‘Nothing has been settled yet,’ he said.

‘Agatha will look after things in future, I suppose?’ said Jack.

‘I suppose so,’ said the Baronet, doubtfully. He waited a little, then said, abruptly, ‘I don’t like the idea of her losing such a companion. Miss Mirabel would be invaluable to her.’

Jack’s mind had been influenced by the part which Miss Mirabel had played in his affairs; by Constance Dasent’s consistent mistrust; by the fact that this mistrust seemed to have been strangely justified. He was no longer a firm believer in her. He did not exactly regard her presence at the present juncture as inconvenient, his father was not the man

to get into awkward situations, but on personal grounds Jack would rather prefer to see her go. He stood by the fireplace, swinging one foot over the broad hearth-stone, looking into the grate. His father watched him attentively.

‘Don’t hesitate to smoke here, Jack,’ he said.

It was a shrewd speech. In his heart he was yearning for reconciliation: he would have given half his remaining years to see his son fling himself into a chair, light his pipe, and say, ‘Father, I’ve been wrong; I am sorry; it is all right now.’ Instead of this, Jack thanked him coldly and said he preferred smoking out-of-doors: with which he went off and left his parent alone. Sir John’s head was bowed forward: he felt lonely and disgusted. For twenty-one years he had watched over this boy as a sculptor gloats

over the image he is fashioning. He had counted on forming a character after his own heart, and this was the end of it all. It was no use possessing Balstoun Castle with such a dismal failure in the shape of an heir. It was humiliation : such degeneracy reflected discredit on the sire.

He sat ruminating on his future plans. At this moment Agatha appeared rather a nuisance : he was fond of her, and proud of her in a way, but she was not his son. Why could not Jack fill his place in the world as properly as his sister? In his mortification he came near to hating him : he could almost have cursed him at the moment.

There was a light footfall in the corridor ; the heavy curtains were pushed aside, and Miss Mirabel's splendid figure stood against the dark background. Sir John looked up, and the lines on his face softened.

‘I heard Mr. Jack go out,’ she said, quietly. ‘I thought you would want to be together; but perhaps you would like me to sing you something, if you are alone.’

Now, it had been an unwritten law, ever since Miss Mirabel had entered the Balstoun household, that her talent as a singer should be ignored. She had exhibited a strong dislike to any mention of her old profession, and it had soon been agreed tacitly that she should sing no more. By this time they had almost forgotten her accomplishment. But Miss Mirabel was far too wise to let go her power. In private she had worked as regularly as ever; her voice was never in more perfect order than at this time.

One evening, amongst the first of their solitude, she had paused on leaving the dining-room. Sir John held the door open, and she stood before him looking straight

into his eyes. Hitherto she had gone off to her room upstairs, leaving him to get through the hours before bed-time as best he could. To-night she made a proposal.

‘I wonder whether you would like to have some music, Sir John? You know I can sing;’ and she smiled charmingly.

‘My dear Miss Mirabel, I would not trespass on your good-nature for worlds, but I should indeed enjoy it.’

He was genuine in his love of music, which is more than one can say of most professing admirers; he understood it a little and liked it a great deal. This was a happy thought indeed, and when Miss Mirabel assured him that she would really be glad to sing, he took her off at once to the music-room. That was how he came to have his coffee there of an evening. The first notes that she uttered fell on him like a revelation; it was divine song.

‘It is positively wicked to hide such a gift,’ he declared, when she left off. ‘Why have you never sung to us before?’

Miss Mirabel passed a well-shaped hand slowly along the top of the piano.

‘When one’s past life has not been happy, Sir John, one tries to forget everything associated with it. I try to forget my professional days.’

‘But I hope you are happy enough with us to enable you to sing without being troubled by old associations.’

She made no answer in words for a moment, but her attitude and expression might have made you think that her past life had been spent on the stage, not in the concert-room.

‘I shall be very glad to sing to you whenever you like,’ she said, ‘but I don’t think I could sing before a number of people.’

Sir John had spent a most agreeable evening; he did the same next day, and on the day after. Now he had received a rebuff from Jack; he was disappointed and out of sorts; and behold his siren was at hand to sing again, and ween him from his melancholy. She went to the piano and sang for upwards of an hour. Sometimes she stole a glance at Sir John; he neither moved nor spoke, but she knew very well that he was under her spell, and she went steadily on, like a spider weaving a web.

Meanwhile, Jack had gone off direct to Mrs. Dasent's house. He had a craving to see her again: they were severed; he had taken his farewell, there was no more to be said: yet at every hour he found something to explain to her or enforce on her. He must see her again at once. It was partly a blind impulse, for he had

really nothing definite in his mind ; only an infinite number of unattached ends which fluttered about and gave him no rest. He hastened down the familiar path, his brain teeming with ideas which he desired to impart. He reached the gate at the shrubbery end, and threw it open. There stood the house before him, but at the sight of it he stopped short. There was not a light in any of the windows. He felt a chill run through his veins : his heart bounded and fell.

Slowly he passed through the trim garden, and laid a trembling hand upon the door : it was barred and bolted. He had entered there a free and welcome visitor so many scores of times : he would never do so more. He had not thought of enquiring whether Mrs. Dasent had actually gone away : now he discovered it for himself, and, resting his arms upon the inhos-

pitiable door, he laid down his head, and groaned aloud.

When he got back to the Castle, Miss Mirabel was singing to his father.

CHAPTER II.

ARTHUR GOES VISITING.

MRS. DASENT had established herself in lodgings in the neighbourhood of Bloomsbury. It was not a change calculated to improve her spirits, and her circumstances were not cheerful. In the first days of loneliness and isolation, it was a longing for Jack that possessed her.

The excitement arising out of the discovery of her husband had subsided, and she was only conscious of a dull aching. She sometimes paid a visit to the British Museum, where she wandered about aim-

lessly, noticing very little ; sometimes she tramped the roaring thoroughfares of London until she was exhausted : but for the most part she was content to sit for hours at a time in her ugly sitting-room, casting and re-casting her plans.

When a woman has married a man for love and lost him abruptly, the unconsumed affection lies dormant somewhere. Of course, in her case, the subsequent meeting with Jack Balstoun had weakened her old interest, and at one moment Dasent's revival would have been infinitely distressing : but she had surrendered Jack before Miss Mirabel had shot her bolt from the blue, and its effect was consequently rather opportune than the reverse. It had afforded distraction and given a counterpoise to her burden. Now in the hour of re-action it was the later and more vivid passion that prevailed : it

was the lost lover, not the lost husband who haunted the Bloomsbury lodging-house; but the latter was not therefore forgotten. If it could claim no higher incentive, her determination to find him was confirmed by curiosity. If a friend leaves the dinner-table hurriedly and without explanation one likes to know his reason, if only for the credit of cook and cellar: but when your husband leaves you at the church-door, it is not to be wondered at if you are inquisitive as to his reason.

Mrs. Dasent was in want of an adviser; she had no one to turn to. The only person she could think of was Miss Mirabel, and from her she revolted. Oddly enough it never occurred to her to seek information from Arthur Balstoun. She had never known him well, and had not learnt to regard him with much admiration. It was

a surprise, therefore, when the maid-of-all-work flung open the door one afternoon, and announced Captain Balstoun.

His manner was shy and apologetic, as though he was doubtful of his welcome. Mrs. Dasent could not conceal her astonishment. They shook hands in silence, and Arthur began to stroke his hat and shuffle his feet.

‘It is very kind of you to come and see me,’ said Mrs. Dasent. ‘I wonder how you found me.’

Arthur was not likely to make pretty speeches; he blurted out the truth.

‘No one seemed to know anything about you at Balstoun, so I went to the post-office and asked what they did with your letters. They gave me this address.’

Mrs. Dasent laughed a little. After all, her intended seclusion had a very slender security. She no longer wondered how

he had found her; she now wanted to know why he had given himself the trouble.

She sat in a stiff horsehair chair, looking at the fair-haired man and waiting for him to explain; she knew she would soon learn without having to put any questions.

‘I was awfully sorry not to be at Balstoun when you left,’ he said. ‘I hadn’t a chance of saying good-bye; and after all that happened, you know, and as I’d been there too, I thought perhaps you might like to see me. That’s why I came.’

It was an involved speech; but it at once reminded Mrs. Dasent that he had been associated with Miss Mirabel’s colonial career; that he, too, had testified to her husband’s existence.

‘It is very kind of you, Captain Balstoun,’ she said. ‘I should certainly be very grateful for any information you can give me.’

‘I can’t tell you much. I saw your husband once when I was with Miss Mirabel.’

‘Was he a great friend of hers?’

Arthur felt himself growing pink, as is the habit of men of his complexion. How was he to say that Dasent had been drunk on the occasion of their meeting, and that Miss Mirabel had treated him with marked repugnance.

‘I suppose they were acquainted like most professionals,’ he answered, vaguely. ‘You see Miss Mirabel lived with her people some way out of the town; I don’t know who her friends were.’

‘Do you know much about Miss Mirabel?’ she asked, suddenly, looking straight at him.

Arthur blushed again and his blue eyes danced. This was the one topic he wished to discuss, and whilst he had

been taxing his simple mind for a means of reaching it, the lady had herself brought it on the carpet. He had three motives in his mind ; first, a genuine wish to put his information at her disposal ; second, a strong desire to warn her somehow against the class of man she was going to find ; both these were purely altruistic. The third was selfish, namely, to exchange ideas on the subject of Miss Mirabel.

Arthur Balstoun was a man of pliant mind, calculated to be swayed rather than to impress. His nervousness and want of force had stamped him as not far removed from a duffer, but he was not without character. Probably the leading influence in his life had been his devotion to Miss Mirabel. There was nothing wonderful in it. She was a beautiful woman, and a clever woman ; she might have fascinated a stronger man. By judicious handling

she could very well keep Arthur at her heels; and her slave he had consequently remained. If she had chosen to accept him and domestic retirement, she would probably have had his unwavering allegiance: he would never have wanted to break the spell. But life had led them into other lines: Miss Mirabel had elected to risk a fall with Fortune, and certain contingencies were inevitable. She had done a desperate thing in trying at the eleventh hour to disprove Herbert Dasent's existence. It might rid her of her rival if Constance were held free to marry Jack: it was a chance, and, as far as she could see, her best chance. She would bribe the man somehow to keep out of the way. He had nothing to gain by re-appearing; his past history was evidence of that: and with him comfortably re-consigned to the grave, her own course would be more

clear. She relied on Jack's perseverance winning in the long run: that was the foundation of her theory.

It had been intensely annoying, then, to be crossed in her plans by Arthur. She had been obliged not only to dissemble, but to abandon her design. But beyond actual disappointment she had felt no uneasiness: it never occurred to her that Arthur would be suspicious. She had given him a specious explanation of her conduct, and he would probably be the more firmly convinced of her saintliness. He had himself confessed to a sentimental sympathy with Jack: he would certainly find excuses for her well-meant indiscretion. She was not aware that Arthur possessed a vein of obstinacy somewhere latent. It was easy to lead him, as a rule; but every now and then he would come to a stop, and, confronted by a matter of

principle, a question of honour, or sense of self-esteem, he would become like unto Balaam's ass in obstinacy and clearness of vision.

That little matter of the telegram had administered a shock to his faith. It made Miss Mirabel no less fair to look upon, no less attractive of speech and manner ; but it planted a hedge of doubt which grew as a barrier between him and her. He was capable of a fine indignation in the event of anyone, man or woman, playing fast and loose with the honour of Balstoun. His abhorrence of deceit was as robust as that of Sir John : his jealousy of the family honour was as keen as the Baronet's own : his resentment against all liberties taken with himself was no less acute. He was much disturbed : he would certainly not palliate an underhand act such as this had appeared to be ; withal, he was sorely

tried by the prospect of having to condemn Alice Mirabel.

‘Do you know much about Miss Mirabel?’ inquired Mrs. Dasent.

‘I have known her a long time now,’ answered Arthur. ‘I met her in Australia, and admired her—her singing, I mean—very much. Then we came home in the same ship: and she has lived with my brother ever since. Yes, I know her very well.’

‘But did you see a great deal of her in Australia—of her home life, and her people? Don’t think me impertinent, Captain Balstoun, but she has made such a difference to my life, and she has somehow got so mixed with my affairs, that I am curious to know about her.’

Arthur looked fixedly at a photograph of his nephew: he took it up and examined the name of the photographer. Mrs.

Dasent watched him with a little annoyance ; she thought it inconsiderate. As a matter of fact, he was engrossed in his thoughts, and hardly knew what he was doing.

‘ Why, no,’ he said, putting down the frame, ‘ I really saw nothing of her home or her people. I only knew her : I saw her pretty often, and thought I knew her very well.’

‘ What did people say of her ? What sort of reputation had she ?’

‘ Perfect, so far as I know,’ said Arthur, colouring a little. He reflected that he would have fought any man in Australia who had dared to speak ill of her. ‘ She was very quiet. She didn’t seem to know many people. I never heard much said about her.’

‘ You like her, of course, or you wouldn’t have let her go into your brother’s family ?’

‘I spoke to my brother about her,’ he admitted.

Mrs. Dasent stopped : she did not know quite how to go on, and wondered whether it would be easier to pursue the question with Agatha. She might be able to tell her a good deal of Miss Mirabel’s antecedents : she could certainly convey an impression of her character. She was half disposed to let the matter drop now, and set about arranging an interview with Agatha. But Arthur had by no means done.

‘May I ask if you particularly dislike Miss Mirabel?’ he demanded.

‘Why do you want to know?’

‘Because you talk as if you disliked her.’

‘I have no reason for that, have I?’

‘Well, I don’t know : that depends.’

Arthur fidgetted again ; they were on delicate ground. Mrs. Dasent leaned for-

ward in her chair. She saw that Arthur knew all that had taken place; she was sure of his good faith, and she recognised his difficulty in putting things nicely.

‘Well, Captain Balstoun,’ she said, ‘I have been questioning you, so you have a right to question me: I will tell you. I am sorry to speak ill of a friend of yours, but I don’t like Miss Mirabel. I always had an aversion to her. I can’t say why: it was instinctive. I always felt that she was intriguing, and intriguing against me. I felt that she hated me; the more fond she professed to be, the more I felt it. I may be wrong—I hope I am—but I think she is a dangerous woman, and I should be very sorry to have her in my house.’

‘Do you imagine she would do anything dishonest?’ asked Arthur.

He was thinking of the telegram, and wondering whether he could in honour

relate the episode: but he had pledged himself to secrecy, and secret he would be.

Mrs. Dasent laughed.

‘You see, I have practically said I regard her as an adventuress. In that case, of course, she would stick at nothing.’

Here were Arthur’s worst apprehensions gaining confirmation. Was it possible that his paragon was a fraud, after all? His pride flamed at the bare thought.

‘After all,’ he said, ‘you only rely on your belief that she dislikes you. You can lay nothing to her charge.’

‘Oh, no,’ exclaimed Mrs. Dasent. She was suddenly alarmed at having allowed herself to speak so freely. ‘I confess my aversion is entirely unreasoning. Remember, I have no ground for breathing a suspicion against Miss Mirabel.’

He would have gladly gone fumbling on in the hope of hitting upon a fresh idea;

but Mrs. Dasent showed no disposition to renew the subject, and Arthur felt bound to show an interest in her future plans.

‘May I ask what you are going to do?’ he said.

‘I shall go to Australia as soon as I can.’

Arthur twisted his moustache nervously.

‘I don’t know whether you’ll think me impertinent in offering you advice,’ he said, ‘under the circumstances.’

‘I should be most grateful; I should like to know everything you can tell me. But you did not know my husband, did you?’

‘No, I saw him that once when I was with Miss Mirabel. That is to say, I happened to have met her coming out of a concert where she had been singing, and I was taking her to a tram-car.’

He was still careful to make their acquaintance appear in a favourable light;

but Mrs. Dasent was too much occupied with her affairs to care much about that.

‘ You saw him : then you can at all events give me your impression. What was he like ? How did he strike you ? ’

Arthur remembered that he was within an ace of striking the other man, and felt that the situation he had to describe was awkward. Furthermore he was bound to see the humour of having to describe to a woman her own husband.

‘ I can’t tell you much, Mrs. Dasent. I did not know he was your husband ; I was told he was an actor : and I—well, I put him down as a kind of Bohemian fellow. Besides, you know, I only saw him by gas light. ’

Mrs. Dasent could not help laughing at this odd conclusion.

‘ You are not drawing a flattering portrait, Captain Balstoun, ’ she said.

‘You didn’t ask me to do that,’ answered Arthur. ‘I am afraid I am putting things too plainly, but I am not a diplomatist.’

‘You are quite right to speak plainly. If there is anything bad to be told, I had better know it.’

She felt in her heart that it would be much kinder to let her find it out for herself. Unpleasant discoveries lose half their sting if they are unaccompanied by grim forebodings. This world contains an enormous number of persons who take a pleasure in prophesying evil. It comes not of innate badness, nor of spite, nor love of mischief; only from lack of tact. A wise man never suggests misfortune or mishap, unless he means to try and avert it; a foolish man tosses about his sinister warnings without any object whatever, save that of saying something, ignoring

the fact that no one is a gainer by starting on an enterprise with a faint heart. Arthur came somewhere between these two ; he had a genuine desire to help the poor lady if he could ; at the same time he had not strength of mind enough to counsel her not to rejoin her husband at all. That is what he would have liked to urge. He had no doubt whatever that Dasent was a ne'er-do-well, and he considered that Mrs. Dasent was too nice a woman to be sacrificed. It was a pity, it was a monstrous shame that she should contemplate such a return for the ill-usage she had received ; he would have gladly prevented her, have interposed on the high ground of friendship, and combatted her resolution. And here he was doing nothing but giving disjointed information as to Australia, and the best means of getting there.

He rose to go presently.

‘Must you go?’ asked Mrs. Dasent.
‘Do wait and have some tea.’

Arthur said he was obliged to leave her.

‘You have told me no news of Balstoun,’ she said then, her face falling.
‘How is Sir John? Is the country looking very lovely?’

Arthur made his answer to these questions, and Mrs. Dasent’s eyes were full of sadness as the picture of Balstoun rose before her.

‘And how is Jack?’ she asked, quite firmly and quietly.

‘He’s gone,’ answered Arthur, after a pause.

‘Gone! really gone to his island?’ enquired Mrs. Dasent, incredulously. It was no small thing to have driven this fortunate young man into exile; for the moment appalled her. She did not speak at once; then she said, ‘I often think that it is a

mistake to regard the marriage ceremony as the only solemn part of a contract between two people. It is irrevocable, of course, but it seems to me that making a proposal means almost as much. The companionship really begins when people get engaged. Married life itself may be cut very short by death, but in making a proposal a man probably starts his ruin, and the woman's ; or their happiness, as the case may be. Look at Jack's case. If he had married me, he could not have spoilt his life more than he seems to have done.'

'He has taken it to heart,' said Arthur, for want of a better remark. 'He wouldn't listen to me or anybody else ; I did my best to stop him.'

'That was good of you. And Sir John : what did he do ?'

'Nothing. He seemed to think Jack might as well have his way.'

‘And Miss Mirabel?’ enquired Mrs. Dasent.

Arthur looked astonished.

‘I don’t think she said anything; she didn’t seem sorry, now I think of it.’

Mrs. Dasent laughed. She imagined Miss Mirabel’s glee at finding herself gradually left in possession of the Baronet. She had had no need to intrigue in this case.

‘Let us hope,’ she said, ‘that he will repent quickly, and come home none the worse. He has two things in his favour, time and youth.’

She said this with a sigh. Neither time nor youth had brought her much good; they were stealing away together, leaving her little gladness.

Arthur said good-bye, and started off to walk home in deep study. His conversation with Mrs. Dasent had greatly im-

pressed him. He had gone there with some strong ideas about Miss Mirabel latent in his mind ; they had sprung into life, and assumed the form of feverish anxiety. Supposing he had been trapped by a rank adventuress ; supposing he had been desperately in love with a clever cheat ? He caught sight of his face in a looking-glass as he passed a hair-cutting establishment, and found he was blushing again. At all events, he reflected, it had not got about amongst his friends : no one could laugh at him ; he was not snared yet. Then he wondered what he ought to do. In his fresh impulsiveness, he would have gone off to Balstoun, dashed into his brother's room, and shouted out, ' John, she's a perfect devil ; get her out of the house at once.'

But it required no long consideration to remind him that it would be easier and

safer to run foremost into action than so to confront his brother *chez lui*. The Baronet's calm stare and imperious voice would undo him on the spot. To tell him then that the woman he, Arthur, had been the means of introducing into the household had been found guilty of tampering with the dignity of Balstoun was more than he dared do. Yet there she was, under a cloud of suspicion, in possession, alone with the Baronet. Arthur's hair nearly rose on end. It was true she had always pleaded a sacred obligation as a bar to marrying him : but supposing Mrs. Dasent was right ; that she was an adventuress who would stick at nothing ! Then she might very well have been keeping him at arm's length with a view to flying at higher game. Arthur bristled with indignation and alarm. Mrs. Dasent had not hinted that Miss Mirabel was besieging

Sir John : it would have smacked of vulgar recrimination : ‘ she balked my marriage, I’ll balk hers,’—but Arthur could not help being alive to the situation.

It occurred to him that he would go and see Agatha. She might not help him, but it would give him a safety-valve if he could talk to her for a little. She was living with one of her mother’s sisters, Aunt Jane. Aunt Jane had been the terror of her childhood : she was so large, and talked so loud and so often. It had always struck Agatha that her own mother stood in awe of Aunt Jane. She used to come to Balstoun very often, and each visit had been preceded by the uncomfortable suspense, and followed by the delicious calm which mark the passage of a thunder storm.

During her sojourn, her enthusiasms and her clamour flashed and rumbled

about the house all day long. She was never still and seldom without a hobby: she was intensely selfish from sheer force of personality; she dominated her own world entirely; yet she was sentimental to the heart's core. She had married Christopher Diggle *en secondes noces*, her first husband having enjoyed a limited spell of married felicity: she was still childless.

She had invented Diggle. He was a West-country man whose progenitor, not far remote, had acquired a large fortune. He had a beautiful property, to which he was devoted. He was shy, solitary, deeply read, and given to fads: he had no wife. Lady Jane met him somewhere; made him get up a party and invite her: drew him out; married him; and carried him off to London, where he found he was expected to occupy a position which filled him with

dismay. He loved his quiet life, and she destined him for politics. He was shy, and she meant him to figure conspicuously in society. He loved the retirement of his shady gardens, and cool valleys at home, and his house in London was continually full of strange crowds. He longed for his modest dinners down yonder with one or two cronies with whom to argue out the evening; and now he had to sit for hours at his own table racking his brains for conversation on topics which bored him, with people of whose very names he was ignorant. He became a Member of Parliament; he became a well-known character about Town—Lady Jane Diggle's husband. He had a perpetual air of surprise at finding himself where and what he was. His wife was his mania.

Arthur rang a bell in Grosvenor Square

and was admitted. He found Lady Jane and Agatha in the drawing-room: the latter welcomed him with both hands. He kissed her and felt proud of possessing such a niece. A few weeks of London had given her style: she was of the matchless type of high-bred English girl.

Lady Jane was cordial.

‘Well, Captain Balstoun, I never see you now: why don’t you come and see me. What do you do with yourself?’

Arthur did not quite know: he had been at home a good deal.

‘That’s no good unless you have an interest in the place,’ she said, pouring out some tea. ‘You know nothing of farming, and I don’t suppose you visit the poor people. Why in the world didn’t you stop your nephew from making an idiot of himself? What is it all about? Did he want to marry the barmaid at the

inn, or is the boy mad? I never heard of such a thing.'

'I suppose he was tired of being at home,' suggested Arthur.

'Then why didn't he go about like other people? Why didn't John make him?'

'John did try, I think,' said Arthur; 'but Jack wouldn't go.'

'He should have been made to go. He would have been if I had had my way; but your brother never would take my advice. They are a pair of idiots, that's all about it,' and she thrust his tea-cup towards him.

Agatha had listened with a troubled face. She moved towards the window and stood there, her splendid young figure clearly outlined.

'Don't abuse them, Aunt Jane. I have no doubt there is a good reason for it all.'

'There can't be, my dear; it's quite impossible. Jack may have a good reason

for hating his father, but he can't have any reason for choosing such a ridiculous way of showing it.'

Agatha swung the tassel of the blind-cord to and fro. She knew her aunt's volubility too well to try and argue with her. She lapsed into melancholy thought. A servant brought in a note for Lady Jane, and Arthur took the opportunity of walking across to his niece.

'I've been at Balstoun lately,' he said. 'They all sent their love to you.'

'You lucky man,' said Agatha, 'I wish I could run away home.' She turned a sweet, joyous face towards him: a face lit with Nature's purity, untainted by any of the passions that help to mar the lives of most of us. She was always joyous as the morning; but a cloud came over her soft eyes as she went on: 'Tell me, Uncle Arthur, how is everybody?

Are you quite sure nothing has changed since I left—nothing except that Jack has gone? He wrote and told me the whole story. I am glad he did, because it shows he trusts me, but it made me very unhappy. And I know Aunt Jane will get it all out of me if she suspects that I know.'

'There's no one at home now but your father and Miss Mirabel,' said Arthur.

'I am glad she is there: he won't be able to mope. Isn't she a dear, Uncle Arthur?'

The Captain looked at her and realised that from such a well of truth no suspicion of baseness could arise. It was useless to expect shrewd criticisms from such a guileless observer.

Another visitor was announced: a young man, tall, with drooping shoulders. He was very ugly, shock-headed,

and untidy; he had a distressing complexion, and wore spectacles. Arthur wondered if this sort of thing was now the fashion. Presumably it was, for Lady Jane welcomed him effusively, and then passed him on to Agatha.

‘ Captain Balstoun, come and talk to me,’ she cried. ‘ I’ve not had a word with you yet, and you never come and see me now.’

Arthur began an agitated protest, but she cut him short.

‘ Do you see that man?’ she inquired, looking towards the young man in the further room. ‘ That’s Lord Morecombe. Just imagine his position: three-and-twenty; heir to a dukedom, four castles, and a hundred thousand a-year. He won the Newcastle Scholarship at Eton, and all the prizes at Oxford, I forget their names; it may have been Cambridge. He

wrote the best prize poem they have had for years, and now he has made the best maiden speech ever heard in Parliament. He's a perfect paragon, Captain Balstoun, and he's not a prig.'

'He's not very smart,' muttered Arthur.

'What does that matter? One forgets it.'

'Does one?' enquired Arthur, simply.

'How does Agatha get on?' he asked.

'Of course she gets on very well indeed. I'd make a plainer girl than her get on if I had charge of her. She's very sweet, Arthur; exactly like darling Cornelia. She reminds me of her every day.'

And the honest eyes filled with tears. Arthur felt uncomfortable; it was a relief to go back to the painful subject of Jack. Lady Jane raged with indignation.

'I shouldn't mind if his father locked him up, one would know how matters

stood; but this arrangement is shocking. Who was the woman, Arthur; married or single? Some one impossible, of course. Nobody except your brother, who always was a prig and never would listen to reason, could have made such a mess of it.'

She went on pouring out her opinions, which grew more and more violent, until Christopher Diggle appeared before them in person. He entered the drawing-room with an undecided air, as though he was not sure whether he was in the right house. He was of middle height, and not graceful; his hair was grey and he wore a beard. His expression was thoughtful and his general demeanour rather timid.

'Christopher, why aren't you at the House?' cried out his wife.

'It's Wednesday, my dear,' he answered, apologetically.

'I forgot that. Here's Captain Bal-

stoun, and Lord Morecombe is over there. Come and have some tea.'

'Morecombe; that's the man I want to see. I've a bone to pick with him; he was all wrong about the Treaty of Utrecht; I told him he was. Now I'll have it out——'

'Christopher, come and have your tea and leave the poor man alone.'

Christopher was arrested in the act of going, and meekly accepted his tea—Agatha and Lord Morecombe were left together.

'I saw Tommy just now,' said Mr. Diggle, sipping his tea. Tommy was his brother-in-law.

'Tommy!' exclaimed Lady Jane, her large face expanding in smiles. Thomas, twelfth earl, was the youngest of his family; many years Lady Jane's junior; and her affection for him had always been one of her most amiable qualities. She

had upheld him as the most eligible man in London, the handsomest, the cleverest, the dearest. He was doubtless dear to her, and he was certainly handsome ; but where the cleverness came in nobody quite knew. His sister always spoke of him as a man of promise ; he had hitherto belied her anticipations, assuming them to be taken in the usual sense.

‘Tommy!’ exclaimed the lady; ‘where did you see him, when did he come back? I thought he was still yachting. Why hasn’t he been to see me?’

‘He sent you a message,’ began Mr. Diggle, deliberately.

‘A message!’ broke in his wife. ‘What’s the good of a message? I want to see the boy himself.’

Mr. Diggle waited till she had done.

‘A message,’ he repeated, meekly, ‘that he would come and dine to-night.’

‘But we have got people to dinner. We are twelve, and he’ll make thirteen. Christopher, how stupid you are: why didn’t you tell him?’

‘I advised him not to come. I said I thought there was something of the sort, but he said he’d chance it.’

Lady Jane was torn between her responsibility as a hostess and her feelings as a sister. Mr. Diggle’s face brightened.

‘Mightn’t I dine at the club, dear?’ he suggested.

Lady Jane answered with a shrug of dissent which subdued him instantly.

‘Does Morecombe dine?’ he asked, reviving a little.

‘He dined here on Tuesday: he can’t come every night,’ answered his spouse.

‘Oh, did he?’ said Mr. Diggle. He seemed quite surprised.

‘I don’t believe you know half the

people who dine here,' said Lady Jane.

'I am sure I don't,' he answered, with alacrity.

Lady Jane rose and went across to a table to write a note.

'Charlie and his wife must come, that's all,' she said, as she rang the bell.

She was sorry to put out Charlie and his wife, but perhaps they were accustomed to being put out: she was not. Arthur rose to go, and Lady Jane thought it would do her husband good to walk with him.

'I've already walked from the House,' he said, appealingly, 'and I'm tired. I must write some letters, too, before dinner: I'm afraid, Balstoun, I can't.'

'Don't forget dinner, that's all,' said his wife. 'He very often stays downstairs till the drawing-room is full of people. I really believe he'd come in as he was if his servant didn't see he dressed.' She

shook Arthur's hand cordially. 'Come and see me again,' she said. 'You must dine one night quietly: then we can see something of you, and you can talk to Agatha. Good-bye.'

Christopher Diggle accompanied his guest downstairs. 'My wife——' he began, but he never finished the sentence. Something was on his mind, but only his predominant idea found utterance. He took Arthur into the library, and gave him a cigar.

'I think the only tolerable part of the day in London,' he said, 'is the evening, when one can sit in the park and smoke a cigar. I hardly ever get time for it. My wife——' again he left the sentence broken short.

'It's very good of you to take such care of Agatha,' said Arthur.

He spoke with a little of his brother's

pomposity for once. Mr. Diggle stopped in the act of lighting.

‘She’s an angel, that girl,’ he said, and he sighed: perhaps he was imagining his own home with such a daughter in it.

‘Do you want a cab?’ he inquired, as they stood in the hall.

‘No, thank you: I do all the walking I can in London,’ said Arthur.

‘You are quite right: but I believe my system is right.’

‘What’s that?’

Mr. Diggle cast a furtive glance upstairs, then he drew up to Arthur and almost whispered,

‘Massage and hot water.’ He fell back again, and nodded his head impressively. He looked upstairs again. ‘My wife——’ he said; but he changed his mind, and began measuring Arthur with his eye. ‘What d’you weigh? About eleven stone,

eh? You don't put on flesh; don't run to stomach: lucky man! I suppose you are always in good trim? Never mind, my treatment couldn't do you any harm. Massage and hot water: plenty of it.'

'Christopher,' called an indignant voice from above, 'you don't mean to say you are talking that nonsense to Captain Balstoun? He's mad about his nasty hot water,' she explained. 'I wish he would leave it alone. Christopher, I want to speak to you.'

Mr. Diggle seized Arthur's hand, more as if he would cling to him for help than say an ordinary good-bye; then he obeyed his wife's summons, and Arthur went to smoke his cigar under the shadow of Achilles.

CHAPTER III.

ARTHUR ENTERS HIS PROTEST.

HE chose a seat some way back upon the burnt brown grass and sat down to rest. It was getting late, but there were still carriages rolling to and fro, and a number of the polite unemployed delayed yet going home to dress. Mr. Diggle had spoken truly. There was a coolness and freshness under the trees which was good after the stifling air of the streets. The carriages alone were worth studying: a parade of human beauty, and luxurious splendour not to be outshone in any corner of this

earth's surface. The roar of London hard by had a soothing effect. Hyde Park of a summer's evening is a haven of delightful rest.

He had not sat there long before a man came striding across the grass swinging an umbrella, and whistling an air for his own entertainment. Opposite Arthur he pulled up short with a cry of satisfaction.

‘Spriggins, by all that’s wonderful.’

It was the aide-de-camp, his old brother-officer, whom he had met in Sydney—who had introduced him to Miss Mirabel. He seized Arthur’s hand, and took a chair beside him.

‘Where have you been, Spriggins? I’ve tried to find you a hundred times.’

‘I’ve been backwards and forwards,’ said Arthur, returning his cordiality. ‘But you—what are you doing here? I didn’t

know you were home; when did you come?’

‘A fortnight ago; I had to come on business: it couldn’t be helped. I’m going back at the end of the month.’

‘That’s a short visit after such a long voyage.’

‘The voyage won’t be any shorter next month, old man. It’s a long way; that’s why I’m in a hurry.’

‘I see,’ said Arthur.

‘I tell you what, Spriggins, you shall come back with me. You didn’t half do the Colonies before; you were in such a confounded hurry. Come out with me, and we’ll do you well. I really don’t know what did become of you after you left us; you never wrote. It’s a fine place is Sydney. You come along with me. We’ll look for that Miss What’s-her-name, the

singer. You remember ; the good-looking woman.'

'She's in England now,' said Arthur, desperately.

'Is she? Never mind ; we'll find you up some one else. You are a good sailor ; you don't mind the sea ; you had better come.'

A happy thought flashed across Arthur's mind. He by no means disliked the idea of another voyage, and he would really be glad to help Mrs. Dasent. Why should not she go at the same time? Then if she needed a friend he would be at hand. Jack had, on the eve of his departure, adjured him to keep her in sight—she must never fall on evil times if it could be helped. In this way Arthur might fulfil his trust.

There was one great objection ; he was by no means prepared to leave Balstoun at present. His mind was in a fluid state

as regards Miss Mirabel : even in a state of electric fluid. His inclination was towards one of two courses : to clear her character, and be more devoted than ever ; or prove her guilt, and crush her. These ideas tumbled pell-mell through his head whilst his friend talked. He didn't know, he said, why he shouldn't go : at the same time he was not sure that he could.

‘That’s about the most lopsided answer I ever heard,’ said the aide-de-camp, ‘and I’ve heard you say a good many lopsided things. Walk along with me, and I’ll convince you.’

He pulled Arthur from his chair without pausing for consent, and the two men went towards Piccadilly.

Next day Arthur went down to Balstoun. It had always been his habit to telegraph to the coachman for something

to meet him. He did so now; but on arrival he found nothing. He walked up to the house, leaving his servant to bring his things in a cab. It was pleasant enough in the wide park this summer's evening, and Arthur Balstoun, with a bit of grass in his mouth, strolled leisurely along, hat in hand. At the top of the avenue he sat down in a circular stone seat, flanked with terrific lions: it was really a state of things too charming to leave, this amplitude of verdure, this breezy freshness unknown in London town. He watched the horses summering there, as they cropped the sweet grass; half-a-dozen cows were collected knee-deep and apparently asleep in a pool beneath neighbouring beeches. The swallows circled and skimmed; a tough old pheasant cock made a great deal of noise about going to roost. Beyond all things, it was Arthur's

home, and the sense of homeliness smote full upon his breast. He could scarcely blame an adventuress for coveting dominion here; but he could not any the better forgive her. He sat a long time idly happy, imbibing a pleasant sensation. The sound of horses trotting roused him, and to his surprise he saw Agatha's phaeton and ponies coming up the drive, a lady holding the reins. There could be no doubt as to her identity; it was astonishing, nevertheless. Arthur had never known Miss Mirabel drive like this before. She had been curiously shy of using horses and carriages: she used to insist on walking. Now she had adopted Agatha's private property, never used by anyone but herself.

Arthur left his seat and walked towards the front terrace, where was the principal entrance. Here he awaited her. Miss

Mirabel looked superbly handsome, her brown hair more wavy, her eyes more melting, her features more perfect than ever. She welcomed Arthur coolly.

‘I am sorry I wasn’t in to receive you, Captain Balstoun. I am so sorry, too, you had to walk from the station; but I was obliged to go to Beddington, and Sir John has driven to Waterdale, and the coachman is away; so really there was nothing to send.’

‘It doesn’t matter a bit,’ said Arthur.

He felt the spell of her beauty and her voice coming over him. He helped her to alight from the phaeton, and watched her as she patted the ponies before dismissing them to the stables. Then she sat down on one of the terrace seats and took off her gloves.

‘You are soon back again, Captain Balstoun,’ she said.

It was an ungracious remark : she hardly took trouble to conceal her annoyance at his return.

‘I thought I would rather be here,’ he answered.

‘Are you going to stay?’ she asked.

Arthur reflected that this was the first time anyone had caused him to wonder whether he was welcome at Balstoun.

‘That depends,’ he said. Then plucking up courage he went on ; ‘I was on the point of asking you the same sort of question. What do you mean to do? do you stay here?’

She stared straight at him : how dared he interfere? There is this difference between men and women ; the former love unfolding their affairs ; the latter do not. Woman has no happier trait than that of taking pleasure in man’s selfish confidences. She gives him infinite consolation

and help; she carries her own requisite store of self-comfort concealed somewhere as the camel stores his food. Miss Mirabel had in times past had all Arthur's confidences: she had never given her own; she was not going to begin now.

'I say the same thing as you; that depends.'

Arthur was determined to get on.

'I always understood that Agatha was to manage the house as soon as she came out. In that event it is natural I should wonder what you will do, is it not?'

'It is very good of you, Captain Balstoun, but I don't see how it affects you.'

Her assurance angered him.

'I don't want to hurt your feelings, but I must remind you under what circumstances you came here. Have you forgotten why I was so anxious you should come?'

‘Not in the least. I hope you are not going to say you consider you have a claim on me because of that. I made no promise whatever.’

‘I know that very well.’

‘What do you want me to say then?’

‘I asked this : supposing you are going to leave Balstoun ; you have refused to marry me ; what do you mean to do?’

She looked at him with a wicked smile ; she imagined him incapable of anything beyond impertinent curiosity.

‘Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof : let us talk of something else.’

‘You have not asked after Agatha,’ said Arthur.

‘Haven’t I ? How is she ? I hope she is enjoying herself.’

She didn’t appear greatly concerned.

‘I saw Mrs. Dasent, too ; she is going

to Australia to find her husband. It is a sad story.'

'What is?' asked Miss Mirabel, shortly.

'Why, her story; I never knew a woman I pitied more,' said Arthur.

She scarcely seemed to attend to what he said.

'It is amiable of you,' she remarked.

Her indifference was almost worse than her late abruptness.

'I understood you were sorry too,' he said.

'Did you?'

'I don't see why else you deliberately forged a telegram in my brother's name, which amounted to condoning a felony—namely, bigamy,' he blurted out.

Miss Mirabel was astounded: not only at receiving a rebuke from such a quarter, but at the gravity of the charge it carried with it.

‘ Captain Balstoun, you have no right to say that.’

‘ I am sorry if I offend you, but I can’t understand you. If you were not driven by intense pity, what made you do it? You must have had some reason; I often wonder what it was.’

He hit the ground with the end of his stick, making patterns in the gravel. Her conduct at the time had seemed reprehensible; in the light of his new suspicions it became monstrous. He could not help seeing the connection, and the conviction was growing on him that her conduct had all tended one way—to secure Sir John for herself.

Miss Mirabel watched him with a scared expression. She recalled the part he had taken in recent affairs, and rapidly conjectured whether he was, after all, a power to be reckoned with. He had been

speculating as to her motives: that was a bad sign. She remembered then what she never ought to have forgotten; namely, that a man is constantly dwelling upon the ways of the woman he loves: probably Arthur had been little better than a spy. His re-appearance had vexed her; but she still regarded him only as a bore, not a danger. Suddenly he had assumed menacing proportions, and she began to hate him.

‘It was for Mr. Jack I was sorry,’ she said, deliberately.

Sir John drove up before Arthur could reply.

‘Hullo, Arthur: I am glad to see you,’ he cried. ‘Did you see Agatha in London? How is she getting on?’

He met his brother on the terrace-steps, they went up together and sat on the seat which Miss Mirabel had left.

‘I have had a tiresome day in Water-

dale,' said the Baronet. 'County business and a dusty drive home: I am horribly thirsty.'

He was on the point of moving when Miss Mirabel came from the house with a cup of tea.

'Don't stir, Sir John; I have brought you some tea.'

He accepted it gladly, drank some and looked at her. It was uncommonly nice to have everything done so smoothly and quietly. He had never been so comfortable as during these recent days: his cloud had a silver lining.

'Any news of Jack?' asked Arthur.

Sir John finished his tea and put down his cup.

'I believe not,' he said. 'My son is trying an experiment. I suppose we shall one day learn how it has answered. Meanwhile, we are deprived of his company.'

There was an awkward pause: Arthur felt he was on dangerous ground. Miss Mirabel broke in:

‘Would you like to dine on the terrace, Sir John? I think they have laid dinner indoors.’

‘Yes, I should. I should like to dine there every night; don’t you think it would be nice? Arthur, ring the bell, like a good chap: I’ll tell them.’

‘Let me go, Sir John,’ said Miss Mirabel.

‘Why should you trouble,’ objected Sir John.

‘It is no trouble, I am going indoors.’

When she had gone, Sir John turned to his brother.

‘My dear Arthur, you introduced an invaluable person to us in that lady. I don’t know how we should get on without her. Nothing ever goes wrong indoors.’

‘What is to happen when Agatha comes back?’ asked Arthur, boldly. ‘I suppose she will take command then?’

Sir John went and leaned his back against the balustrade, and surveyed the broad house front, with its gothic windows and high gables.

‘It is natural that she should,’ he said, presently, ‘but of course she will want experience: a little help at first will be an advantage. Besides, I daresay she will be away a good deal. She is sure to be popular: she will stay about. This place won’t be lively I am afraid. My time is getting past, and Jack has chosen his own line.’

He stopped, and his tone revealed the bitterness that rose with any allusion to his son.

‘I don’t want to burden Agatha with responsibility.’

‘Then perhaps Miss Mirabel will stay?’

‘It would be foolish to lose such a woman without good reason. We should soon miss her.’

A happy thought flashed upon Arthur, and he seized it instantly.

‘I tell you what, John: you should go abroad. Joe Dagley has half persuaded me to go out to Australia with him; he is home on leave. You are alone here; Agatha will be constantly away until she marries, which will be soon, I suppose. Shut up the house and come a long voyage: Australia, China, Japan, India, everywhere. You will be lonely here; it will be better for you. Then you could start fresh when you come back. After all, Miss Mirabel can’t stay on here as things are.’

Arthur had spoken in his usual galloping style; Sir John had eyed him curiously.

‘Why not?’ he asked, coolly.

Arthur was puzzled. He could not say, ‘Because she’ll marry you whether you like it or not; and if you don’t marry her, perhaps you should.’ He stuttered a little.

‘I don’t know; I thought she probably wouldn’t.’

The Baronet hardly liked being advised upon the management of his house; still less did he care to be questioned about Miss Mirabel’s departure. However, Arthur had been the means of her coming, and perhaps he was entitled to ask questions.

‘It is to be hoped,’ said Sir John, ‘our young friend Crusoe will shortly return to his senses, and bring home a wife; until then, I see no reason why Miss Mirabel should not stay here.’

‘But the voyage, John,’ urged Arthur. He was full of his new notion. ‘Do con-

sider it seriously; I am sure you would enjoy it.'

Sir John left the balustrade.

'I have done my share of knocking about the world,' he said. 'I am comfortable where I am; I would rather stay here. Come and dress.'

Nothing could have been more comfortable than the small round table, with its white cloth and bright flowers, set outside the dining-room windows. The day was fading; the hills and forests growing gradually black; the sunset halo dying down and merging, as it paled, through shades of pink and green into a pure blue sky. A single star stood sentinel in heaven. There was no sound in the branches; the birds were still, the leaves unstirred. The barking of a dog at the keeper's house had a rough friendliness about it, and the distant trotting of a horse fell crisp as the

hammering of a silver bar. A cottage window threw out a cheerful red light; it was a perfect night. Sir John took it all in as he sat down: he was in a good temper and prepared to enjoy himself.

He had recovered his spirits in great measure. He had satisfied himself that Jack's whim must wear off in good time; it was early yet to have misgivings on that score, and what might have been a grievous trouble had dwindled into little more than a vexation. That is how he was regarding it at present.

'Now, Arthur: some scandal, please. Tell us the latest crimes they have been committing in Town.'

'I came here to get away from London. I don't want to bring it with me.'

'That won't do; we want your news.'

'I have none.'

'Then what a dull dog you are. Have

some of this hock. I found it the other day downstairs ; it is excellent. We've been drinking nothing else lately : but we'll have some champagne to-night I think, Barndore.'

The butler signified his approval, and went to get it. A footman brought out a shaded lamp and put it on a pedestal behind Sir John, so that it threw a convenient light on the table. The Baronet leaned back in his chair. He looked at his wine ; then sipped it. Then he nodded towards the park.

'No, Arthur,' he said, 'I don't mean to leave my home any more till I die. What do you think he says, Miss Mirabel? He is going to Australia, and wants me to go with him.'

Miss Mirabel started perceptibly.

'Indeed!' she said. 'When do you go, Captain Balstoun?'

‘At the end of the month, if at all. It is a sudden idea.’

Miss Mirabel put down her fork, and leaned back in her turn so that the lamp’s shadow threw her face into obscurity. Arthur could not help seeing that the news interested her. He looked at her necklace—a quaint gold band of Indian work, studded with rubies, on which the lamp-light fell.

‘Clearly,’ he thought, ‘she dislikes the idea of my carrying off my brother.’

Miss Mirabel easily recovered from the shock. She sat up again.

‘You really think of going?’ she inquired. ‘It will be interesting to see the country again. Sir John, I think it would interest you: you would find it so new and strange.’

‘My dear lady, that’s just the reason why, with your permission, I will stay

where I am ;' and he emptied his glass with a relish.

They sat on after dinner, and drank their coffee out-of-doors. Sir John reclined in a deep chair which was brought out for him, and smoked his cigar in entire contentment. Arthur sat with crossed legs and smoked his cigarette. He could not take his eyes off Alice Mirabel, whose loose, light tea-gown rustled a little as she swayed to and fro in her rocking-chair. One long, lithe hand was stretched over the arm, the other held a tiny handkerchief to her throat.

'You ought to have a shawl,' he said ;
'let me fetch you one ?'

'I am going in, thank you,' she said, rising.

'No, no,' Miss Mirabel, don't leave us,' cried Sir John. 'You can't have anything to do ; or, if you have, you ought not to do

it: you must be tired. Let Arthur fetch you a shawl, and then stay here.'

She got up.

'It is certainly more pleasant out-of-doors,' she said. 'I daresay you won't know where to find my things, Captain Balstoun; I will go and get a cloak.'

As a matter of course Arthur volunteered his company, and they went indoors together. As they passed through the hall she sat down on an ottoman.

'So you are going back to Australia: it seems odd.'

She had treated him with such indifference hitherto that he was rather surprised at the softness of her tone. He looked down at her.

'Yes, I suppose I shall go,' he said.

'With Mrs. Dasent?' she inquired, suddenly.

'Why no,' answered Arthur, taken aback,

‘not necessarily. But it’s not impossible she may go at the same time; and, if I can help her when I am out there, of course I shall.’

‘That means you will go to Melbourne with her, and help to find Dodd: you know it does.’

‘You credit me with great unselfishness. I would far rather prevent her from finding him.’

She was so beautiful as she looked up from under her dark eyelashes that again Arthur felt driven to banish all feelings towards her save those of love. ‘I only mean I can’t bear the idea of her belonging to such a swine.’

She laughed at this.

‘And yet you blame me for trying to suppress him;’ and she raised her eyebrows archly.

Arthur gave his great moustache a pull.

‘Why, I think one must face it,’ he said.

‘And you mean to help her?’

‘Why, yes, I suppose so,’ he answered.

Miss Mirabel looked at him fixedly for a moment, then rose quickly. She fetched a cloak from a stand, and swung it over her shoulders. Without another word, she went back to the terrace.

‘You have been a long time,’ said Sir John. ‘I had nearly gone to sleep. I began to wish I had gone in with you and got you to sing. You know Miss Mirabel sings to me of an evening, Arthur.’

‘You don’t mean that?’ exclaimed Arthur. ‘I thought you never sang now.’

‘Very seldom,’ she answered, drily. ‘Would you like me to sing something, Sir John?’

‘It seems taking advantage of your good-nature,’ he said, getting up slowly; ‘but I do enjoy it very much.’

He led the way into the music-room, and turned up a lamp. Arthur lit the piano-candles, and Miss Mirabel stood by him, humming an air and turning over some music.

‘You never would sing for me,’ murmured Arthur, reproachfully.

But her gracious mood had gone again. She scarcely took the trouble to answer, and only uttered a curt ‘Oh!’

This rudeness greatly astonished Arthur; in the whole course of their acquaintance she had never been off-hand in her manner, even when least kind. His allusion to Australia had revived her interest for the moment; otherwise she had persistently ignored him. He could only jump at the conclusion that she felt sure of her prize now, and thought it no longer necessary to keep him at heel; and he felt unreasoningly jealous. As she began

touching the chords, he leaned over her, and said, hurriedly—

‘What is the matter? Why do you treat me like this?’

She pretended to be put out.

‘Please speak louder, Captain Balstoun. I don’t know this song; I can’t play it and listen to you at the same time if you whisper.’

Arthur Balstoun went and sat down, and Miss Mirabel sang her song. She hated him now: hated him because he had proved himself less insignificant than she had imagined. He had got in her way, thwarted her, dared to show initiative when he ought to have been quiescent. Withal he had declared allegiance to Mrs. Dasent, for practically his proposed journey was to be undertaken on her behalf. A woman only rejoices at the transfer of a man’s devotion from herself to another

when she does not love him but likes him very much, and longs for his welfare. Miss Mirabel had never been in love with Arthur; probably her feeling for him had hardly deserved the title of friendship; but she had kept him hanging on a good time now, and doubtless resented his wavering. She had no idea of her patient follower seeking fresh fields and pastures new of his own free will and accord. That may have increased her chagrin; anyhow she was angry, and indignantly resented his new behaviour.

Arthur lingered on at Balstoun in a miserable state of indecision. It requires a strong man to shake off a woman's fascination directly his faith in her is clouded; such infatuations are not grounded on common-sense. He still had a moth-like attraction towards her. On the other hand, he was seriously alarmed; he fore-

saw his brother married at no distant date. Miss Mirabel behaved with consummate tact: she was never in the way, never out of the way; did and said the right thing in the right way from morning till night. At the time when he was sorely tried by his son's misdeeds, she was really soothing his troubles by brightening his home. Arthur could see the charm working. How then could he go to his brother and say, 'This woman whom I brought here is a fraud. Dismiss her, lest she betray you also.'

He had no proofs; he risked the imputation of maligning the woman who would not marry him. He wished it were possible to bring Jack to reason; he wondered whether he would be justified in getting Agatha home: somebody ought to be put on guard, at all events.

His time was running out, and without

having progressed beyond receiving an increased amount of slighting from Miss Mirabel, he was forced to go to London to prepare for his Australian voyage. He came to the unheroic determination of writing his brother a farewell warning. He dined at the club alone; and after dinner he devoted several hours to composition, of which the following was the outcome :

‘ MY DEAR JOHN,

‘ I am sorry to interfere in your affairs, but I feel bound to put you on your guard against Miss Mirabel. I admit I wanted to marry her myself; she gave me to understand she was engaged to some one else. It is very clear now, she means to marry you if she can. I have had unexpected reasons lately for doubting her good faith : I wish I were at

liberty to adduce them. I can only implore you to enquire carefully and consider thoroughly before you take such a step. I presume to offer you this warning on the ground of my devotion to yourself and the family honour. Good-bye,

‘Yours ever,

‘ARTHUR.

‘P.S.—We sail on Friday. Mrs. Dasent goes in the same ship.’

Sir John found this letter on the breakfast-table. He read it without the change of a muscle: then he put it in his pocket, and breakfasted comfortably with Miss Mirabel. In his own room later on, he pulled it out and re-read it. He was sitting in a low chair, smoking a cigar. He blew some smoke into the air, and then laughed aloud.

‘I fell foul of my son about one lady:

I'm going to do the same with my brother about another. One consolation; I seem to be able to cut out the latter, if I could not the former;' and he laughed again.

'Confound his impudence,' he ran on, as he folded the letter. 'It is like his muddling stupidity to write and tell me I am being fooled by an adventuress. That's like Arthur.'

This was his train of thought: it embraced no plain emphatic repudiation of statement. He debated for a little time the propriety of sending his brother a rebuke. Somehow he thought it would be better to ignore him. He was leaving the country; and, vexing as it was, he felt strongly disposed to forget his impudence as soon as possible. He had a long talk with Miss Mirabel that afternoon about her past history. With its bare

outline he was already familiar; her Irish parentage; the small country town where her father had kept a boys' school; her early orphanage; the subsequent hard life as teacher in a girls' school; the migration thence into the world of singers. There was no disguise anywhere: she talked frankly, almost fully: her lot had been lowly, save during a spell of quasi-celebrity as a singer, but she showed so bold a front that no one would dream she had anything to be ashamed of; any ugly chapters to suppress.

Sir John went for a solitary walk after tea. He had occasional wandering fits: the feeling of something wanting would come over him. Whether serious or ridiculous, Jack's absence was a disappointment. He missed the young character he had hoped to fashion according to his

ideal ; his *alter ego*, as he had meant him to be ; his other self in sympathies and aims, his master even in gentlemanly equipment. He had built a pedestal, and behold it bore no idol.

He walked about fretting until he encountered Taylor, his head forester. The old man had a good deal to say ; he was garrulous and slow of speech ; also he was full of projects. Sir John followed him through miles of mossy rides, agreeing or objecting to his schemes. It was interesting both for the sake of woodcraft and from a natural pride in Balstoun, but still there was the lack of something. Sir John would have given a good deal to have had his son there, even at the cost of being contradicted on every point. Presently Taylor paused under a clump of beeches.

‘ Beg pardon, Sir John, have you had news from the island ? Our Matt writes

regular: but it ain't been his turn for a letter lately.'

Sir John and his son exchanged formal letters at intervals. He assured Taylor all was well at Windlaw.

'I'm glad of that, Sir John. My old woman takes on a good bit. Ye see, sir, we're old folks, and our Matt never left his home till now. The old woman misses him badly.'

Sir John was angry.

'Selfish young devil,' he thought.

He meant his own son, not Taylor's. The picture of these old people robbed of their son for such a wanton caprice roused his temper.

'Tell her, Taylor, to cheer up. I've very little doubt Mr. Jack will get tired of the life he's leading. We shall both have our sons back before long.'

'Eh, Sir John, you're kind. But Matt

says there they mean to stay. Anyway, he mustn't be too long coming : his mother don't get no younger.'

Sir John said good-night, and went off in a worse humour than before. His son had done a positive wrong to these people. He felt tempted to write and expostulate, but pride stepped in ; he was not going to risk misinterpretation and a refusal into the bargain. He went and shut himself up in his room and re-read Arthur's letter for something to do. That Arthur's suspicions were the result of disappointment, he had not the slightest doubt. He had never placed much confidence in his brother's discretion or judgment. He regarded him as eminently prone to every existing form of stupidity and wrong-headedness. Miss Mirabel's character was as clear as daylight ; there was nothing to conceal in her history ; the references she

had produced in satisfying Sir John's relative in London at the time of her engagement had been undeniable. It was perfectly clear to him that, if Arthur had had anything serious to aver, he would not have cloaked it under a senseless protest which resembled the whine of a love-sick schoolboy, more than anything else. He mentally favoured Arthur with an opprobrious epithet ; felt rather glad he had gone abroad ; and contemplated the continued pleasure of Miss Mirabel's society without a particle of misgiving.

CHAPTER IV.

JACK AND MRS. DASENT APART.

Two forces have especial influence on a man's life : his first love and his real love. When a boy of fifteen falls in love with a woman of twice his own age (as generally happens), it often gives a tone and a turn to his character that affects his whole career ; when a man meets a woman who has the power of absorbing and dominating his entire being, he is either made or unmade by the event. Should a man be fortunate enough to combine these two situations in one, the gravity is proportionately increased.

Jack Balstoun had never been in love: he had felt an inclination occasionally to strut and show off a little for the benefit of one young lady or another, but no one had ever put the fire in his veins until he had met Mrs. Dasent. At the age of twenty he had felt the flame; he had burnt with a passion which was pure and chivalrous, however much one might have dubbed it 'calf-love.' Its fervour was unquestionable, also its novelty: whether it was supreme destiny in addition, one could not safely prophesy. Jack naturally thought it was, or he would not have taken such a desperate step under the smart of disappointment. He was young and headstrong; his composition contained a romantic strain which led him to form high ideals, and left him liable to excessive disgust when they failed him. His bitterness after his late troubles was intense

and not morbidly affected. He had allowed one association to enfold the whole scheme of his rather narrow existence, and when that was torn away by a series of rough wrenches, he felt the appalling deadness of hope which it is not easy to bear. He lost control of himself, and all consideration for others. A craving seized him to put the present as far into the background as possible ; to cut himself adrift from his own sphere. He had plenty of resources : he was possessed of a love of knowledge, a desire to understand things ; and he felt pretty confident of supplying himself with interests. Not that this weighed greatly : his main object was to hide, and work out his grief alone ; possibly after the manner of a child who goes and cries its heart out in a dark room.

At all events, he set about making himself an isolated home, as we have seen ;

and in due season he found himself established on Windlaw, with Matthew Taylor for sole companion. This worthy seemed to have no regrets over his choice. He did the house-work as a matter of business, but he threw himself into the work of cultivation with enthusiasm. Autumn was drawing on, and there were the long winter months beyond ; but in the spring, Matthew promised himself such adventures in the realms of botany and woodcraft as would transform a bleak waste into a radiant garden. Windlaw should become an Arcadia of lawns and bowers spangled with every colour that will blossom out of earth. He had *carte blanche* : he went to and fro in the yacht, and brought such things as he needed. Jack at first was incapable of sustained effort : his heart-sickness overwhelmed him. When everything was finished and in order, when he realised

that he had accomplished exactly what he had sought for, a reaction set in, and the loss of familiar scenes and faces seemed likely to preponderate over all other forms of anguish. The thought that he could no longer go down to Mrs. Dasent's cottage and spend hours in a companionship which seemed to be the fulfilment of himself, maddened him. He made a pretence of helping Matt in his work. The latter, surrounded by trenches and mountains, would dig and shovel and heap for hours on end, singing lustily the while : visions of a paradise of his own making cheered his soul. Resting by-and-by to wipe the sweat from his eyes, he would see that Jack, after digging awhile in silence, was sitting now, with his chin on his hand, staring out across the wide sea. Matt had learned the truth from Jack's own lips by this time : he would watch him therefore

with troubled eyes for a minute or two, then return to his work with a shake of his head, and without resuming his song.

Jack would sit for hours like this : he could not shake off his listlessness.

‘ Now, Mr. Jack, don’t you think the path might go behind that next tree, so as to give more room here ?’

Matt made an effort to interest him. Jack looked up for a moment, but he evidently saw nothing.

‘ All right, Matt, that will be first-rate. Take it easy, don’t go at it too hard ;’ and he relapsed into reverie.

This was the result of all his honest henchman’s efforts. Tactless as most of his class, Matt sought to comfort his chief by pretending to reproduce Balstoun. He always spoke of the cottage as the Castle ; there were the shrubbery garden, the temple garden, the memorial lawn, all as they

were at home ; except that the shrubbery, the temple, and the memorial were non-existent here. Each allusion was a fresh stab to Jack's heart.

‘To-morrow, Mr. Jack, I'll make a cross and put it up just as the memorial stands at home. You'll hardly know the difference.’

He grinned with pleasure at his own ingenuity.

‘It's no good, Matt. We made up our minds to leave home. We can't leave it and have it.’

‘Why, now, Mr. Jack, you sit by the cross I'm going to make, and look at the sea : as long as you don't look at too much of it, you might just as well be looking into the lake at home.’

Jack gave a savage laugh.

‘No, Matt, don't let's make-believe. It won't help us.’

He was touched all the same by these childlike overtures. Matthew's grin subsided : again he shook his head.

‘ Heart up, Mr. Jack ; heart up, sir. Things is never so bad but what they might be worse,’ he said, and went back to his digging.

During the first weeks, Jack could do nothing except write in a voluminous journal. It was a safety-valve for the outlet of teeming and tormenting ideas. He could not read ; he had no patience. He used to wander about his territory utterly dissatisfied. Meal-time was less irksome than might have been supposed. Matt had tried at first to remain servant and eat alone in the kitchen, but Jack had insisted on socialistic principles. The fare was simple, their united culinary talent being moderate ; but, such as it was, they shared it amicably, and Matthew was so honest

and genial that his companionship could not fail to have a certain charm. Moreover, he had somehow acquired such a knowledge of botany and geology that his table-talk usually took the form of a lecture. He had a peculiar facility for illustration : he would often push aside his plate, and, with his knife-handle, draw plans and diagrams on the table-cloth till Jack, leaning across, would lose himself in contemplation.

The evenings were still warm enough for sitting out, and whilst Matt was occupied indoors, Jack would sit with his back against a tree—his pipe and his grief for company. The waves rippling on the beach alone disturbed the stillness, save when a friendly nightingale began her lucubrations. How this bird came to Windlaw it would be hard to say. Jack sometimes pondered indifferently on the

subject; occasionally discussed it with Matt. Neither of them knew enough bird-lore to decide; and unfortunately I, moi qui vous parle, je ne sais non plus. There she was, however; and, after Jack had waited an hour or so, the mellow note would come tentatively from a neighbouring branch. First one, two, three, short timid calls; presently a long swelling rush of melody; then a pause, and after that a series of plaintive lamentations, so mournful that they seemed to be addressed personally to her hearer.

Jack liked listening; he felt as if some one was sorry for him; some one who understood better than honest Matt. That was what he lacked: some one to understand him; and that, alas! is the ultimate cry of the selfish soul: 'Nobody here understands me.' He watched the stars, and wondered whether life on another

planet would be less unendurable than on this ; watched the moon, and wondered whether she (Mrs. Dasent understood) was similarly employed.

As an example of the trivial things which spoil fine calculations, it may be mentioned that Mrs. Dasent was by this time in the Southern hemisphere, and therefore not in a position to see the moon at the same hour as Jack, in sixty degrees of north latitude.

He had constructed in his sitting-room a shrine for Mrs. Dasent. Upon a pedestal, draped in black cloth, stood her photograph, a large reproduction on china, framed in solid silver and surrounded by every scrap and token in his possession by which her personality could be invoked. On the wall above hung her water-colour drawing of Balstoun. Beside the photograph were all the gifts he had received from

her, principally books which they had talked about often ; one or two Christmas presents, not otherwise valuable ; a favour she had given him in a cotillon at Balstoun ; getting rather dingy this last, but powerful to revive vivid recollections. Around the pedestal stood a barrier of flowers. He would have burnt incense there, no doubt, had it been seemly ; but she loved not incense, and she had loved flowers. Matt never failed to bring from the mainland a store from the florist's shop, and the shrine was seldom without its circle of roses, so long as the time of flowers lasted. This shrine Matt never touched ; no hand save Jack's had ever been laid upon it. It stood in the most comfortable corner of the room, facing the chair in which he habitually sat. He spent long periods silently regarding it ; sometimes he addressed the portrait aloud. Then Matt, if he chanced

to be within hail, would break in with, 'Heart up, sir. Things is never so bad but what they might be worse.'

The days grew shorter, the nights more chilly ; and there was less temptation to be out of doors. By this time Jack had, at all events, acquired more patience over his books. He became a voracious reader of biography and travel ; he was in a fair way to collect a vast store of miscellaneous experience at second-hand. Anything that carried him into other times and other scenes was a relief, and he accompanied explorers to the Arctic seas and African deserts with equal composure ; shared the queer reflections of the small, and the luminous thoughts of the great ; ruled and fought with generals, governors, and prime ministers : probed, in fact, into the adventures of all those whose doings had been deemed worth recording in print.

He limited himself to one weekly paper : he exchanged letters at long intervals with his father, reserved and formal on both sides. He received kind effusions from his sister, but in the selfishness of pre-occupation he could not meet even her half-way. As for visitors, he had none. At first excursionists used to come bobbing from the shore in sailing-boats to see the eccentric young man of whom they had read in the papers, but the notices declaring that Windlaw was private property and that landing was absolutely forbidden were so uncompromising that they returned always disappointed, and frequently sea-sick into the bargain.

Meanwhile, the Orient liner *Alvarado* (6,000 tons: Captain Snooks) was rolling through the great Australian Bight with Mrs. Dasent, Arthur Balstoun, and Cap-

tain Dagley amongst her passengers. The outward voyage had been full of incident, to be sure—quarrels, flirtations, scandals in large quantities—but, exciting as they all were at the time, they bear so little relation to our story that it seems unnecessary to relate them.

Suffice it to say that Mrs. Dasent had, much to her inconvenience, been tacitly voted heroine of the play. That means that all the women hated her and were jealous of her, whereas all the men loved her and were jealous of one another. The former cut her, which was a release: the latter she was obliged to cut, which was a trial to such a gentle-hearted lady. Their attentions, however, were intolerable; and to avoid their ill-bred gallantry and humourless wit it became necessary to snub them.

‘What am I to do?’ she enquired one

night, after leaving Colombo. 'Two of them have been to ask why I wouldn't go ashore with them. I said because I had gone with you. Then they said soldiers always had the advantage, and asked whether I wouldn't give the civilians a chance.'

She was sitting on deck between Bals-toun and Joe Dagley; her only safe situation.

'Say you don't know them, and don't want to know them,' said Dagley, bluntly.

'But I think it's never worth while hurting anybody's feelings,' she said.

'They haven't got any,' asserted Dagley.

'You see,' continued Mrs. Dasent, 'they don't mean to be rude. If they did, one would know what to do: they don't know any better.'

'It becomes a question whether you are

going to make them unhappy, or they you,' said Dagley. 'I should advise the former.'

Mrs. Dasent laughed.

'I shan't be able to do it. I haven't got the moral courage.'

It requires a dash of cruelty to administer a rebuff: Mrs. Dasent's constitution lacked it. The result was that Arthur Balstoun in future, kept watch so assiduously and looked so ferocious upon the approach of any other man, that it was decided he had been accepted by the lady: and the rivals retired as from a lost contest.

They approached their journey's end, and Mrs. Dasent's eagerness increased. She had been quiet enough throughout the voyage. The pale, thoughtful face could tell its story only to those who had known her a few months ago. No one

would have guessed that she was playing a strangely trying part in life's comedy. She gathered from Joe Dagley that, by landing at Adelaide, she could save time in reaching her destination. He and Arthur were booked as far as Sydney, but the latter found various reasons for changing his plans to match hers. Armed with letters of introduction from the aide-de-camp, they left him, therefore, in St. Vincent's Gulf, and prepared to encounter Fate's award. A tiresome night journey confronted them; but beyond that lay the day of action. It was an anxious time for both of them.

'To-morrow,' thought Mrs. Dasent, as she watched the flaming sun go down behind the Murray River, 'to-morrow I shall probably see him. To-morrow,' she repeated. So many to-morrows had come and gone since that dreadful wedding-day,

she had never expected him with the coming dawn; so entirely had the possibility of seeing him gone out of her mind.

Every moment her impatience grew stronger. Arthur Balstoun watched her from his corner seat; noticed her new-born animation, and devoutly wished himself at home. His anxiety to reach Melbourne decreased as hers rose.

‘To-morrow,’ he reflected, as he twisted his big moustache, ‘to-morrow I shall probably have to confront her with a drunken pig, and leave her to his tender mercies.’

Often during the voyage he had tried to prepare her for such a discovery, but he had never found heart for it. For the life of him he could not become a bird of ill-omen when she needed kind words. Arthur’s soft heart had brimmed over with compassion, and she had responded with such frank confidence that he could more

easily have leapt overboard than say, 'Prepare for the worst; a perfect hell on earth.' Now the time was short: she must learn the truth; and Arthur found himself wondering what would be the look in her eyes, and how he should be able to meet them, conscious of having let her go blind-fold when he might have shown her light.

When they arrived in Melbourne, he went to the club, whilst she sought refuge in an hotel.

'I shall expect you at ten o'clock,' she said, as she shook hands with him at the station. 'It is so good of you.'

He helped her into a cab, and watched her drive away. The great city stretched before him; it was a dull morning, inclined to be wet, and not calculated to raise drooping spirits. He had his luggage collected, submitted to the ordeal of cus-

tom-house examination, and went on his way. A bath and change of clothes did much to remedy his ill-humour, and a well-served breakfast in the coffee-room put him in better spirits. It was the first meal he had eaten ashore with the satisfaction of feeling that his journey was ended. He had yet to indulge in the greatest of all human joys—the first night's rest in a stationary bed: but it was something to be able to smoke his cigar after breakfast, and reflect that he had neither boat nor train to catch. He had, however, his ten o'clock appointment to fulfil. The temptation was upon him to pay a private visit in advance to Mr. Wilkinson, the manager: it would be best to find out Dodd's present circumstances, in order to pave the way for the wife's discovery. But, even if his conscience would have permitted this, time would not. When he

had looked at a few papers, spoken to one or two men whom he had met here before, and finished his cigar, he found he was nearly due at the hotel. He set off therefore on his uncomfortable errand, and on arrival found Mrs. Dasent waiting for him. She was pacing up and down the public-room, neatly dressed in black. Her face was pale, and her lips compressed, but she showed no trace of irresolution. She gave Arthur a smile of gratitude.

‘Shall we go?’ she said; and led the way into the street.

It was not easy to talk on such an occasion. One topic alone occupied their minds, and that was at this moment too exciting for discussion. Inarticulate anxiety absorbed them. They passed business men hurrying to their day’s work, and Arthur envied them.

‘How fortunate,’ he thought, ‘to have

no affair on hand like mine ! I wonder whether they appreciate it.'

He knew very well where Mr. Wilkinson was to be found ; he was one of the best-known men in the city. As they approached his office, he turned to Mrs. Dasent.

'Don't you think,' he said, 'that I had better go in first and explain things a little?'

It was a last effort.

'No,' said Mrs. Dasent, firmly. 'I came here to find him, and I am not afraid of doing it now the time has come.'

Her voice betrayed emotion, but the face was brave enough, and Arthur, looking down at her with admiration, wished he could save this plucky little heart some part of its inevitable pain. He rang the bell above which Mr. Wilkinson's name was inscribed on a brass plate. A dingy-

looking boy opened the door, and, in answer to enquiry, said with a little hesitation that Mr. Wilkinson was upstairs. His youthful philosophy had inspired him with a mistrust of female visitors, especially such as were young and pretty. They generally represented would-be Juliets and Lady Macbeths, and their interviews usually produced lamentations on their part and consequent vexation on the part of Mr. Wilkinson.

However, he was good enough to show the lady and gentleman into a waiting-room, and take Captain Balstoun's card upstairs. They forced a few remarks in hoarse undertones, Arthur inspecting the theatrical prints on the wall, Mrs. Dasent fixing her eyes upon the door. They had not long to wait; the boy returned, and in another minute Arthur found himself shaking hands with the effusive gentleman

from whom such important information was expected.

Mr. Wilkinson bowed low to Mrs. Dasent, and wondered what was her business. Instinctively he gauged her powers of attraction, and cast her for Esther Eccles on the spot. He was going to produce 'Caste,' and this sweet, grave-looking woman would make an ideal Esther. He would soon find out whether her talent was adequate.

'It's how many years, Captain Balstoun, since you were here?' he began, in a loud voice; 'two, is it, or three? You wear well: not a day older.'

Arthur forced a smile, and said he was pretty well.

'Have you been long in the Colonies?' enquired the manager.

'I only got here this morning,' said Arthur. 'I came overland from Adelaide.' Then he caught sight of Mrs. Dasent's

pleading face, and he flung himself into the tide. 'You remember I sent you a telegram from home about a man named Dodd who used to act at your theatre?'

'To be sure. I told you he was going on as usual.'

'Well, I want very much, and Mrs. Dasent is anxious, to see him. The fact is, I came—that's to say, we called this morning to ask you for his address.'

Mr. Wilkinson regarded them with surprise.

'The man's gone,' he said.

Mrs. Dasent uttered a little cry, but Arthur could only stare with all his eyes.

'He bolted,' said Wilkinson. 'Didn't you get my letter? I wrote to you.'

'Your letter!' said Arthur. 'When did you write?'

Wilkinson replied by asking another question.

‘When did you leave England?’

Arthur told him. The manager took an almanac and ran a pencil down the column of dates.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘my letter must have reached you before you sailed. It’s very odd; I got the address from here;’ and he put his hand on a large red book.

Mrs. Dasent, in trembling accents, made appeal to him.

‘Why did you write? What happened?’

Wilkinson was puzzled: he had not the least idea of the situation. He looked from one anxious face to the other; then put down his pencil, and said—

‘What happened was this. Dodd, as you know, was in my company a goodish time. I always had a notion there was something in the background that he wanted to keep dark. Very well: when I got your telegram, Captain, I was pretty

much interested. I thought it was all coming to light. Next day I saw Dodd: we were rehearsing the "Overland Route:" no, it wasn't; it was "New Men and Old Acres:" anyway, I told him about your telegram. Now, Dodd, I said, I ask no questions, I say nothing, but I draw my conclusions. This may be the making of you, I said: pull yourself together, and see whether you can't give yourself a chance.'

'What did you mean by that?' asked Mrs. Dasent.

Mr. Wilkinson smiled deprecatingly.

'Why, you see, ma'am——'

Arthur startled him by interrupting.

'Won't you finish your story?' he said.

Wilkinson turned in his chair, and went on—

'Dodd didn't say much; only asked what you had said, and looked thoughtful.

That night he came to the theatre as if nothing had happened; so he did for two or three days. Then one morning he was missing. He left no word at his lodgings: he owed nothing; in fact, I owed him something for salary. But he just disappeared out of Melbourne as if he had flown away.'

There was a pause. Arthur regarded Wilkinson fixedly in the hope that he had something more to say; but he evidently had not. Then he looked at Mrs. Dasent: she was very white, and she in turn looked intently on the manager.

'You tried to trace him?' she said.

Mr. Wilkinson began to feel a little uncomfortable. It was possible, he thought, that friend Dodd was a rascal, and that he, Wilkinson, had unwittingly given the warning that thwarts Justice.

'May I ask if he was a particular friend

of yours?' he said, turning to Arthur.

Arthur Balstoun did not dare look at Mrs. Dasent. He was in terror lest she should declare the truth: that would only make matters worse.

'We know him,' he said, quickly; 'we were anxious to see him. It is a nuisance his going away like this. I suppose you have no idea where he has gone: if it is to another company, for instance?'

Mr. Wilkinson twisted a diamond ring round his plump finger.

'I shouldn't think that is likely,' he said, quietly.

Again Mrs. Dasent asked, 'Why do you say that?' and again Arthur anticipated the reply by cutting in. He was blundering through the interview. His object was to prevent a painful scene in the presence of a stranger: he had a chivalrous desire to screen Mrs. Dasent; moreover, he knew

that the story, once unfolded here, would be all over the town in two days. His instinct was noble, but his tact indifferent. He was like a fencer who parries valorously, but has no conception of giving the *riposte*.

‘ You have made no effort to trace him?’ he asked in his turn.

This diverted attention from the lady’s last question, but indirectly gave rise to another.

‘ It was hardly my business,’ answered Mr. Wilkinson. ‘ I owed him money for salary, and I didn’t much think he’d miss asking for that.’

‘ Was he badly off?’ asked Mrs. Dasent, in an anxious voice.

‘ He wasn’t exactly a saving man,’ replied Wilkinson, evasively.

‘ Didn’t his landlord try to find him?’ she asked.

‘No. Dodd left his money for rent, and the landlord thought himself well out of it.’

‘Why? Did he want to get rid of him?’

‘I don’t suppose a landlord cares who comes and goes, so long as he gets his rent,’ cried Arthur, desperately. ‘It’s very unlucky; but it’s no use complaining. Will you come back to the hotel, Mrs. Dasent?’

He had risen from his chair, but she did not move. Her face bespoke intense disappointment: she was not going to give in without an effort. Arthur had turned to Mr. Wilkinson.

‘We have taken up a lot of your time,’ he said, apologetically.

Mr. Wilkinson smiled.

‘By no means. I am sorry I can’t help you. I can’t understand why you never

got my letter : I said all there was to say in that.'

They were on the point of shaking hands when Mrs. Dasent spoke again.

'Surely,' she said, 'some of his friends must know or guess what has become of him. They must have talked about him, and come to some conclusion. May I see them and talk to them?'

Mr. Wilkinson smiled another sort of smile.

'I am afraid, madam, that would not help you much. A man like Dodd doesn't make many friends: they can't help considering it a good riddance.'

'Why?' inquired she; so sharply that Mr. Wilkinson answered at once,

'He was such a moody sort of creature, and kept so much to himself. Besides, the drink was always getting him into trouble.'

Mrs. Dasent started forward with an exclamation, such as a child might make if a friend struck her suddenly: a wail of dreadful amazement. Mr. Wilkinson looked frightened, and Arthur's blue eyes danced wildly as he gave his moustache a great twirl. They stood silent in dire confusion.

'I am sorry indeed,' said Wilkinson, in a low voice, 'if I have said too much. Remember, I supposed you knew all about him.'

'He was my husband,' said Mrs. Dasent, simply.

Wilkinson leaned forward heavily, with one arm on the table. He looked at her and whistled gently.

'That's another matter,' he said. Then he turned to a cupboard, and revealed a considerable assortment of bottles. 'I am afraid you are a little upset,' he said. 'May I give you a glass of wine?'

She waved a refusal, and reseated herself. Arthur reluctantly did the same: the mine was fired, and he could not prevent it now.

‘You see now,’ said Mrs. Dasent, slowly, ‘that I have a right to know the truth. It would have been better if I had known it sooner.’ She gave Arthur a reproachful glance which smote him to the heart, but he was not unaccustomed to such rebuffs, and he hung his head in silence. ‘Please tell me all you know about my husband.’

Mr. Wilkinson was ill at ease: his task was not easy.

‘Indeed, madam, I know very little of him. He applied to me several years ago for a place in my company: I gave him a trial, and found he could act. He was unsociable, and apparently did not want to make friends. Unhappily, he was given to drink: however, he was always sober

enough to do his work, and he stayed with me till the other day.'

'Where did he live?' she asked next.

'He had a room in a lodging-house near the theatre. I went to see him there when he was ill two years ago. Excepting when drink got him into scrapes, he led a decent sort of life. I always thought, as I told you, that he'd got a history. I only wish I had known, madam, what his history was. I would gladly have tried to lend a helping hand.'

He made her a little bow. He was not a refined man; but he had a good heart somewhere. Moreover, he had a wife; and his home-life was happy. This gave him grace to appreciate the acuteness of her distress. She inclined her head a little, but relapsed into thought. It was a trying situation for the two men, one of whom felt ashamed of having revealed the

painful truth, the other equally ashamed of having concealed it.

‘Has his landlord a wife?’ she asked.

‘Yes : an excellent good creature.’

‘Please give me the address.’

Mr. Wilkinson took some paper from the writing-stand before him, and did as he was required.

‘I hardly know whether I ought to wish you success in your search,’ he said, as he gave her the address.

Mrs. Dasent only said, ‘Thank you.’ She had come to find her husband, and not even the stunning discovery she had made could upset her resolution : at the same time she was not disposed to discuss the situation with a stranger, however well-meaning he might be. She shook hands with him and prepared to go : he insisted on attending her to the street-door. Arthur followed without a word : he was framing

a sentence; but when it came to delivery it took a simple form—

‘Don’t tell anyone; it’s a lady’s confidence, eh?’ with which insinuating remark he passed into the street.

‘I think I will drive home,’ said Mrs. Dasent.

Arthur called a passing cab.

‘May I not go with you?’ he said.

She only held out her hand, as if she had not heard him.

‘When shall I come?’ he asked.

‘Later: I will write to you. I must have time to think.’

He paused a minute; then he said—

‘I didn’t really know he was so bad. I thought it was no good alarming you unnecessarily. I wish I could have helped you.’

He looked down upon the pavement with such a rueful air that she could not

help feeling sorry for him in the midst of her own distress.

‘Never mind,’ she said, putting a hand on his. ‘It was so dreadful: I spoke without thinking; I must not blame you for anything. You have always been my friend. Don’t think me ungrateful.’

The cab rolled away, and Arthur was left to reflect upon the astonishing ill success that attended all his enterprises.

CHAPTER V.

AGATHA GOES OUT DRIVING.

SIR JOHN BALSTOUN was right when he foretold that Agatha would spend a good deal of her time away from home in future. She became popular in London, and Aunt Jane was not the sort of person to allow her young friend to suffer from want of opportunities. By the end of July she had either volunteered or consented to take her niece to half the country-houses she had ever visited.

Sir John was pleased: he liked his daughter to be in the full tide of life. He

was fond of her, and proud of her looks. Indeed, he liked to have her about him, and used to think he could ill afford to let her go away. First of all, however, Jack's affairs had absorbed him, and now he felt so uncommonly well off with Miss Mirabel to talk to in leisure moments, that he easily reconciled himself to separation from his daughter. He took great interest in her movements, nevertheless, and repeatedly declared himself pleased to hear she was enjoying herself.

Agatha, meanwhile, had a strong homeward tendency. She had hastened thither at the end of the season, eager to find herself in the midst of old scenes and associations; still more eager to learn about her brother. On the latter point she was met by a guarded reticence. Her father could tell her no more than she knew already; Miss Mirabel smiled despondent-

ly, and sighed out a pious hope that dear Mr. Jack might soon amend his ways.

No woman, having entered the world, can retain all her girlish simplicity. Agatha was at once conscious of a change in her home surroundings. Instead of chattering unconstrainedly about the ailments of village grandmothers and the virtues of a new pony, she found herself conversing in the grave and orderly manner which she had contracted in her new sphere. She had thought frequently about her future position at home; she had looked forward with pride to assuming the management of affairs. Now that the time had come, a delicacy seemed to arise. Her place at dinner on the night of her return was easily settled; they dined 'three' at a round table on the terrace. Next day Miss Mirabel offered to assist at her interview with the housekeeper, thus delivering up

authority without demur; but Agatha felt as if she was being played with: she was painfully conscious of her inferiority.

She described the scene with forced humour to her father, in the hope of drawing him into a proper understanding; but the Baronet contented himself with a compliment to Miss Mirabel's good judgment and good sense. This froze his daughter's confidence; there was something so difficult in asking frankly whether he wished her to assume the responsibility of housekeeping or not. She hoped he would invite her to it, but he did not; he seemed to take it for granted, and yet she was not encouraged to take the initiative; she must wait and see.

Her first experience was not cheering. There were several fountains underneath the terrace, and it had occurred to Agatha that they might as well play. When the

servant brought tea, she told him to have them all turned on. Then she made tea, and wondered impatiently whether her father would be pleased with the effect. Sir John appeared presently ; he stopped short and looked round astonished.

‘ That idiot Barndore has turned on the fountains. You didn’t tell him to, Miss Mirabel, did you ? ’

Agatha explained at once, and Sir John turned them off.

‘ It’s all right,’ he said, ‘ only there is not enough water for them at present, that’s all.’

It was a small matter, and better calculated to distress a child than a woman ; but it was a failure for what it was worth : and beyond the rest, Sir John’s direct appeal to Miss Mirabel had not escaped her. She poured out his tea with an unsteady hand ; she had to ask how he liked

it mixed. Then she forgot to offer him anything to eat, whereas Miss Mirabel gave him toast and butter. She did not know her father's little likes and dislikes; probably he was not aware of them himself, so silently and astutely had they been studied; but there were daily requests now for something or another that was missing. Miss Mirabel was meekness itself. She never thrust her advice on Agatha, never breathed a suspicion of criticism; but she always knew exactly what was wanted, and supplied it the moment it was demanded.

Perhaps Agatha's best plan would have been to have taken Miss Mirabel into her confidence from the first, but she had been deterred chiefly by the indecision of her own position. Now it was too late. No woman could admit defeat under such conditions: no woman could be entirely

untainted by jealousy. Miss Mirabel offered her no assistance; she would certainly not sue for it. She was half-hearted about going away from home, she would have liked to stay and assert her position: but she was due elsewhere.

Sir John was annoyed at feeling so little disinclination to part with her: it was unfatherly and unworthy of him. There was no doubt about it, something hung between them. It was not consciousness of mismanagement and discomfort, it was a phantom which prevented good understanding.

‘I am sorry to leave you, father,’ she said, when she was waiting for the carriage. ‘I hope you will not be lonely.’

‘I shan’t be lonely,’ he replied, gaily: ‘go and enjoy yourself: don’t worry about me.’

They parted excellent friends, but Agatha knew, and he knew, that he was

not going to miss her: he could get on very well without her.

She came to and fro between her visits, and always felt more shy of arriving at Balstoun than anywhere else. At present her only feeling was that of disappointment. She had looked forward so proudly to her exercise of authority, and behold, she was little better than an outcast. She was inclined to be jealous of Miss Mirabel, but in no deep spirit of resentment. She wished she could compare less unfavourably with her former governess, but she had not yet one idea of disloyalty or intrigue on the part of that amiable creature.

So the time went on until Christmas. Agatha spent a good deal of her time at Christopher Diggle's, for Lady Jane loved filling her house; and a good deal more at other people's houses. Now she was at home for Christmas. Trouble had arisen

on the very first day. It had been customary to provide a giant Christmas-tree for all persons connected with Balstoun, and Agatha had written to her father, suggesting that time was drawing on and preparations should begin. To this he had replied that Miss Mirabel had taken the matter in hand, and the arrangements were far advanced.

Agatha could say nothing: she was away from home, and, after all, it was natural that Miss Mirabel, who was on the spot, should do what was necessary. She came home one afternoon rather early. She had caught a train sooner than she had expected, and there was nobody at home when she arrived. It was a rough day, showery and cold, but there remained still some hours of daylight. She resolved she would plunge *in medias res* and make up for lost time. She rang the bell,

intending to order her ponies : she would go and confer with the rector's wife, who was always great on festive occasions.

‘ Will you order my ponies at once, please,’ she said, when the footman came.

‘ The phaeton is out, miss. Miss Mirabel went driving directly after luncheon.’

‘ Where has she gone to?’ asked Agatha.

‘ I think I heard her say she was going to the rectory about the Christmas-tree.’

‘ Oh,’ said Agatha. ‘ Thank you.’

She felt more angry than she had ever been in her life. It seemed as if her ponies had been taken from under her nose. Miss Mirabel had never done this before. Agatha had learnt that she had occasionally made use of them on special occasions during her absence, but never had they been ordered by anybody when she was at home. She was really indignant.

Miss Mirabel came home late, bringing Sir John, whom it appeared, she had overtaken walking. The Baronet was in a good humour: he looked fondly round the oak roof of the hall hung with holly, kicked the blazing logs till the sparks rose in clouds, and indulged in one or two facetious observations.

‘What time did you get home then, Agatha?’ he asked.

‘Soon after three.’

‘You had a cold welcome. What have you been doing since?’

‘I meant to drive, but I found the ponies were out.’

Miss Mirabel put a hand on her shoulder.

‘Agatha, dear, I am so sorry. I would not have done it for the world if I thought you would be home.’

Agatha made little response.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ she said. ‘I only wanted to go and see Mrs. Stubbs; if you have done everything, there is no need for me to go.’

‘It’s all right,’ said Sir John. ‘Don’t you bother, Agatha: Miss Mirabel has arranged it all beautifully. She knows every man, woman, and child in the place; don’t you, Miss Mirabel? Mrs. Stubbs says you do.’

Agatha wished this could have been said of her; she wanted to fill up the gaps in her father’s life, and she perceived somebody else doing it.

‘Very likely,’ she said. ‘When I get my ponies I will go and make friends with them too.’

Sir John went away presently, and Miss Mirabel began forthwith to beg pardon.

‘You know, Agatha, I would not think of doing it when you were at home, but I

wanted to have things in good order, so that you should not have too much to do. You were not expected until the evening, and Sir John thought I had better have your ponies.'

She spoke in such soft, winning tones, that Agatha's heart relented.

'I didn't mean to be rude, Miss Mirabel. Of course I don't mind: you shall use them whenever you like.'

Miss Mirabel protested, but Agatha was conscience-stricken; she felt she had lost her temper and spoken unkindly to one who could not defend herself.

'You shall drive me to-morrow,' she said, 'to show that you bear no ill-will.'

Next day there was quite a scene: Miss Mirabel refused to drive; Agatha refused to forego her penance. It took so long to settle the dispute that it ended in their not going at all. On the following day it

rained, and they could not go. On the day after, however, they actually set out, Miss Mirabel driving.

It was a bright day, with keen frosty air; the ponies had not been out for two days, and were fresh. It was exhilarating to spin along the country lanes between bare hedgerows, and Agatha had no more resentment left in her heart towards Miss Mirabel. They had gone a very short way and were crossing a piece of common, when a man on a horse came through the hedge on their left, narrowly missing the ponies. He managed to pull clear of them, but the sudden apparition was too much for their high spirits. They reared, plunged, and in spite of Miss Mirabel's adroitness, finally bolted. Agatha turned pale and clutched the cushions. Miss Mirabel showed no sign of fear.

‘Sit still,’ she cried. ‘Whatever you do, don’t jump out.’

The ponies flew along; the phaeton bumped and leapt over the hard road: the cold wind lashed the faces of the two women, one stern and resolute, the other scared and pale. They were approaching some cross roads at the corner of the village: it was an awkward turn, and they might very well be dashed to pieces whichever way the ponies chose to go. The only figure visible was that of a man a hundred yards ahead, who turned as he heard the stampeding noise behind, and pulled his hands out of his pockets. He appeared to intend no further action, and stood as if he was watching the Lord Mayor’s show. As the ponies dashed up to him, however, he sprung with a sudden bound at their heads, caught them

short at the bits and threw his entire weight against their progress. There was a perilous confusion of his legs with their legs, some plunging and swerving; the phaeton was swung round and thrown on to its side, and finally the ponies came down with the man underneath.

The phaeton had rolled slowly over on Miss Mirabel's side, so that she had been able to jump out without letting go the reins. Agatha had been less lucky: she had lost her balance and fallen rather heavily. The groom who was unhurt drew her at once out of harm's way, and with the aid of the horseman, who had ridden up to see how much mischief he had done, endeavoured to restore her to consciousness.

Miss Mirabel meanwhile saw their rescuer lying before her, with too pairs of hind legs flashing and whirling round his

head. It was an appalling sight ; he must be killed in another minute. She dropped the reins and tried to seize him by the foot that was clear of the *mêlée*. As she stooped she caught sight of his face and started back with a scream. One pony was working itself free and every kick went closer to the head of the helpless man. Miss Mirabel hesitated a moment, a positive frenzy in her expression ; then regardless of limb and life, she flung herself forward and dragged him from what menaced instant death.

He emerged breathless. His clothes were torn ; his hat was gone, and he had a forlorn appearance ; yet this was not sufficient ground for the look of contempt with which Miss Mirabel regarded him, especially as the gentleman had incurred these disfigurements for her benefit.

‘ When did you come ? ’ she asked. He

deigned no reply but stared at her intently. 'Did you get my telegram?' He nodded assent. 'Where are you staying?' He jerked his head in the direction of the village inn. She continued her catechism; 'What have you come for?'

The man spoke at last, very slowly.

'You sent to tell me that my wife was coming to look for me. I didn't want her to find me, so I came here; it was the last place I should be likely to see her.'

It was Mrs. Dasent's husband. He was still good-looking, for he had regular features and dark blue eyes: but he had obviously run to seed; beyond his momentary dishevelment he had an air of moral breakdown all over him. Miss Mirabel heard his reply; then she said shortly—

'Be in to-morrow at ten,' and turned away.

She found Agatha sitting on a bank

listening to the apologies of the stranger who had brought them to grief. If humility and self-reprobaton could mend wounds, then she would have recovered instantly. As it was she was shaken and bruised : apparently that was all.

The groom had unharnessed the ponies with the assistance of some villagers who had arrived, and was ruefully examining their wounds. Miss Mirabel suggested that the best reparation in the power of the prime offender would be to get a conveyance to take Agatha home, whereupon he galloped off to secure a village fly. Miss Mirabel showered consolation and sympathy on Agatha, and whilst everyone else was occupied, Dasent slipped away unobserved.

Agatha showed no sign of injury after the first shock was over. She spoke sensibly, said something consoling to the

stranger when he returned with the cab, and drove back with Miss Mirabel, calmly reviewing the events. These she recapitulated with clearness to her father; after which she went to bed, became delirious, and when she recovered could remember nothing that had happened since the moment when she fell from the phaeton.

Next morning, true to her appointment, Miss Mirabel set out for the village inn. It occurred to her that her friend had probably changed his name again, so she refrained from asking for Mr. Dodd. The landlady presented herself with many smiles, and expressed a hope that neither lady was the worse for yesterday's mishap. Miss Mirabel made a short allusion to Agatha.

‘I have come,’ she said, ‘to inquire after the gentleman who stopped the

ponies. It was so brave of him: I hope he was not hurt. Is he in?’

‘Lor’ bless you, Miss Mirabel, he was up and away this morning almost afore we was out of our beds. “Tommy,” he says to my little boy,—Tommy’s the one as goes to school, miss; not the one as works up at the Castle; that’s Charlie,—“Tommy,” he says, “carry my bag to the station and I’ll give you sixpence,” he says. “You leave your breakfast, Tommy,” I says, “and carry the gentleman’s bag like a good boy.” And away he went, miss, sure enough.’

Miss Mirabel was confounded. Dasent’s flight was evidently a great disappointment to her, as indeed it ought to be to anybody who reads this story. Dasent’s appearance had been so surprising, that an explanation would have been interesting. In the event of an interview one might have learnt why Miss Mirabel had taken

such a friendly interest in him as to warn him of his wife's approach, and whether she knew his grounds for preferring to live *incognito*. She had never evinced admiration or sympathy for him : she has treated him altogether in an unaccountable manner. Women, however, are apt to display such startling sidelights of character, that Miss Mirabel may, after all, have had no motive beyond a good-natured wish to keep an old comrade from trouble. True, she had once gone so far as to ask him to die conveniently, but very likely she knew he would rather die in the letter than have his wife restored to him in the flesh. She knew more about him than any of us ; that is undeniable.

She made inquiries as to his conduct during his stay. The landlady was voluble, but the drift of her remarks was merely that he had not stayed many days ;

that he had been entirely uncommunicative, and that his only ascertained deed was to pay a prolonged visit to Mrs. Dasent's former home. It had been surmised that he proposed to rent it, and village gossip had been busy accordingly. Miss Mirabel's expression betokened strong disapproval. She wanted to know more of his actions; but the landlady, though she had much to say, had nothing to reveal, and her visitor was obliged to return unsatisfied to the Castle.

She found Agatha in high fever: she had concussion, and in this plight she passed her Christmas not very merrily. There was never danger to her life, however, and in good time she revived. Then Miss Mirabel appeared at her best. Whether she wished to help Agatha or only to impress Sir John, it would be ungracious to consider. The fact remains that the

invalid's room was pervaded with the ineffable charm of a beautiful presence, a soothing voice, an unfailing, unperceived attention.

No wonder so many love-affairs are hatched in the sick-room. When a man is exhausted in body, his mind is at play upon the surface. Without strength, his frame unknit, he lies with all his nerves strung like a musical instrument ready to vibrate to the slightest touch. No man could have been nursed by Miss Mirabel without falling desperately in love with her. No woman could help holding out her hand, and exchanging caress for caress. Agatha came under the spell: she became selfishly exacting of her nurse's presence, and the weeks of convalescence did much to dissolve the jealousy with which she had been inclined to regard Miss Mirabel's presence in her father's household.

CHAPTER VI.

FREDDY WHITE FALLS ILL.

LADY JANE DIGGLE sat in her morning-room, one day in March, venting her ill-temper on her husband. It was one of her peculiarities that she preferred to have her house-parties at the time of year when most people have finished with them. She regarded the shooting-season as an intolerable nuisance. The men were good for nothing whilst it lasted: they came down, shot all day, and talked about it all night. This did not interest her, and, being an outspoken lady, it must be confessed that

she was not considered a good hostess by some of her guests. They did not understand being scolded like tiresome school-boys who are invited as a matter of duty, and allowed to amuse themselves under protest, and only on condition they give no trouble.

But in the early spring Aunt Jane loved to have the house full. She had an inexhaustible fund of energy, and if anyone ventured under her roof without a taste for gardens, trees, venerable buildings, scenery, tea-picnics, theatricals, round games, and unlimited talk, such a visitor either acquired the same or else was dimly bored. Such was Lady Jane's idea of enjoyment.

This week she had collected a number of her favourites. Agatha was there: it was her first visit since her accident. Lord Morecombe was coming. Professor Flap,

the historian, was expected. And now two vexations had arisen at once. Her brother Tommy had thrown her over to go racing, and she discovered that her husband had invited Freddy White.

She could hardly forgive her brother's defection. 'It is not as if he had a political meeting; one could understand that,' she cried. 'But it's too bad to go to those horrible races.' As a matter of fact, a race-meeting was the only kind of meeting Tommy ever attended, but Lady Jane was stout in her illusion. 'And whatever induced you, Christopher, to ask Freddy White?'

She showed still less disposition to forgive her spouse. Christopher Diggle thought for some time; then he said—

'I met him in Piccadilly.'

'I daresay you did: that's no reason for asking him to come here. How did you know I wanted him?'

‘ You often invite him yourself,’ argued the husband.

‘ Only when I am obliged to. I can’t bear him : he makes everybody do just what he pleases, and turns all I say and do into ridicule. I only ask him because people expect to see him, and he’d probably be spiteful if I didn’t.’

‘ He is never spiteful,’ said Christopher, gravely.

‘ He is in the way,’ she went on. ‘ He won’t get on with Lord Morecombe, and he’ll make Agatha run after him to amuse him all day.’

‘ Very well,’ said Mr. Diggle, cheerfully. ‘ Morecombe and I get on capitally ; we can amuse one another.’

Lady Jane tore up a note she had been holding.

‘ Christopher,’ she said, ‘ I wish you wouldn’t interfere with my arrangements.’

Freddy White came: brother Tommy did not; and Aunt Jane continued to protest in her fussy, effusive manner.

‘If only Tommy had come,’ she said one day at lunch, ‘we could go to the infernal regions.’

‘Good heavens!’ said Freddy White, ‘has he taken to spiritualism, or scraped acquaintance with Satan?’

Somebody laughed, and Lady Jane burst forth—

‘I wish you weren’t so fond of being funny. I want to settle something sensible, and I can’t while you are talking nonsense.’

‘But I’m not, Lady Jane. I don’t see why your brother should be able to take us to the infernal regions any more than I can.’

‘You know what I mean; they call the caverns at Upton Vale the infernal regions.’

‘I didn’t know. But why can’t you go without Tommy?’

‘You want to have everything your own way,’ she answered, angrily. ‘It wouldn’t be at all amusing without Tommy; he was such fun last time we went there.’

‘He might be less funny another time. Besides, we weren’t there, so we shouldn’t know.’

Lady Jane always got in a rage with Freddy. If he did not deserve it now, he would soon.

‘It is like you to upset everybody, Freddy. No, we’ll go to the Abbey to-day and have tea there. You must all come; a man is painting it, and he may be gone if we don’t go to-day. He is making a charming picture.’

No one had much to say. Carriages were ordered, and the guests were expected to be ready. When the time came

there were two defaulters : Agatha had a head-ache, and prayed to be left behind. Aunt Jane was solicitous ; made every provision for her comfort, and suggested that Morecombe should stay and amuse her.

Agatha would not hear of this. ‘ I have told Lord Morecombe all about the Abbey ; he mustn’t miss it on any account.’

Morecombe looked undecided. He wore a shabby ulster coat, a frayed collar, and creaking boots. He was eager to see the Abbey ; he had a strange inclination for Agatha’s society. But he was an enquirer first and a lover afterwards ; and he went.

‘ If you don’t mind, Lady Jane,’ said Freddy White, emerging from a passage, ‘ I don’t think I shall go.’

‘ Really, Freddy, you are too tiresome ; why not ?’

‘ Because I feel ill. It won’t make any difference, will it ?’

‘It will make a great deal of difference.’

‘It’s a nuisance being such a charming creature,’ said Freddy, ‘but I really am ill.’

‘I don’t believe you,’ said Lady Jane, and began packing her guests into the carriages.

Christopher Diggle came quietly up to Freddy.

‘You want massage,’ he whispered, confidentially, ‘massage and hot water: plenty of it; it’s liver. The second footman can massage a little, and they’ll give you as much hot water as you like. My wife—’

‘Christopher,’ cried his wife, ‘are you ready?’

Mr. Diggle hurried out, leaving his sentence unfinished.

Freddy White watched them depart, then went to the library for a book. He felt ill, and proposed to go to his room and

read himself to sleep. He was surprised on entering the library to find Agatha sitting by the fire.

‘Hulloa, Agatha, I thought you had gone.’

She looked up surprised, but evidently not displeased.

‘Freddy, you here? I thought you had gone too. Why haven’t you?’

‘I’ve got a chill or something: I feel cold all over and not very well anywhere. I am going to bed, I think. And you?’

‘My head is bad,’ she said, laying it against the soft cushion of her chair.

Freddy looked at his pretty cousin, and sat down.

‘Poor old thing, is it often bad?’ he asked, gently.

‘Not as often as it was for some time after the accident.’

There was a little silence. They both

regarded the fire, and thought of one another; a sign of sound friendship.

‘I came for something to read,’ he said, presently rising; ‘something that will send me to sleep.’

She gave him a book she had in her lap.

‘Take this,’ she said. ‘I have been trying to understand about the moon and stars, but it is not lively: it won’t keep you awake.’

He stood turning over the pages for a little while. Then he shut it abruptly, and sat down again.

‘I don’t think you look very grand,’ he said. ‘Is anything the matter?’

A shade of melancholy passed over her eyes.

‘Nothing particular,’ she said.

‘Tell me,’ he went on, without a trace of his usual flippancy. ‘You women are

so shy of telling your troubles, and we men think so much of our own, that we never guess yours.'

Agatha waited a little, then she said—

'I have not been very happy at home. It is so dreadful about Jack: I have looked forward to being there with him and father, and it is so lonely without him. Father won't talk of him, and somehow I don't seem to get on properly with father.'

'How is he?' asked Freddy.

'He seems well enough. You see Miss Mirabel is such a dear that one can't help being cheerful more or less. I ought to be happy there; but I am not. I miss something.'

'Miss Mirabel is a dear, is she?' said Freddy, 'and Sir John is devoted to her? She'll probably marry him before long.'

'Oh, Freddy,' cried Agatha, 'what an idea!'

She laughed in genuine amazement—

‘Fancy father marrying Miss Mirabel.’

‘Why shouldn’t he, if she’s so harming?’

‘You surely know father better than that. If there was no other reason against it, how could he do such a thing after objecting to Jack’s marriage?’

Freddy reflected that if Sir John wished to marry Miss Mirabel, or anyone else, he would let no sentimental difficulty stand in his way: but he said nothing. Agatha went on:

‘Don’t get those foolish ideas into your head. I should never dream of that. If I have any feeling, it is a sort of Cinderella regret that I am put in the shade. Miss Mirabel wouldn’t see it, but father relies entirely on her: and things are just as they were when I was in the school-room.’

‘ I went to see Jack the other day,’ said Freddy, suddenly.

She repeated the words incredulously.

‘ When ?’

‘ In January.’

‘ Why didn’t you tell me ?’

‘ Because the result wasn’t encouraging.’

‘ But, Freddy, what made you do it.’

He seemed shy of telling, but proceeded.

‘ When you were bad, after your accident, it appears you kept on talking about Jack. I don’t know whether you know it.’

‘ Yes, I do. But how do you know ?’

‘ Because the doctor told me.’

‘ When ?’

‘ I went to see him after he had been to Balstoun. I wanted to know how you were.’

‘ That was nice of you, Freddy,’ she said.

‘He told me you had evidently got Jack on your mind, and nothing would do you so much good as to get him back. So I went to see him.’

‘Well?’ she demanded, when he paused.

‘Well. It is an awkward place to get at, and he couldn’t put me up. He keeps no spare room on purpose. He showed that he thought it a liberty on my part, and snubbed me horribly. He says he wants to see no one. He means to spend his life in “learning, teaching, and writing,” like the venerable Bœda; though who he is going to teach, and what is to become of his writings, I don’t know. He sent his love to you especially, Agatha, but he wouldn’t come and see you.’

‘What sort of life is he leading?’

‘Very dull, according to my ideas. They have got their house: his man Friday is always gardening, and Jack is

always reading, as far as I can make out. He looks hipped, and he's grown a beard. I'm afraid he means staying there, for the present at all events.'

'It was nice of you, Freddy,' she said, again. 'Thank you.'

She had made a confidant of Freddy in London: he knew as much about Jack as she did. He was her cousin in a remote degree; her friend in closer respects.

'Why was father so unkind to Jack?' she exclaimed, presently. 'Oh, Freddy, what a dreadful thing family pride is. One ought to be nobody and a beggar, then one can marry who one likes.'

'That is not the usual experience,' said Freddy. 'One generally imagines it is a peer with a million who can do that.'

'I mean one has not to consider appearances then. If father had not treated Jack as he did, I don't believe he would

ever have behaved so oddly. It was chiefly anger with father that drove him from home.'

'Let's hope so,' said Freddy; 'he'll recover all the sooner. If it is only ill temper, he will soon be ashamed of it. Then he will come back. Do you really mean,' he went on presently, 'that you would as soon be a nobody as a great person?'

'Why do you ask?'

'Only because it is what many people say and nobody means.'

'I don't know that I mean it more than anyone else. I am proud of being a Balcourt; I should be very proud of being a Morecombe. In a way I should very much like to be Lady Morecombe.' She stopped and laughed. 'I hope no one heard that except you. Wouldn't it sound dreadful? I mean that I should be proud of having several palaces to live in; I

should like having all the nice things in the world at my disposal, and being made much of wherever I went. I don't profess to be more indifferent to all that than any other woman would be. But I would certainly rather belong to a good family than marry into it.'

'I don't believe people ever know their own minds about getting married,' said Freddy. 'They always imagine things they either don't want or can't have; they don't see or they won't believe that happiness lies in one particular direction.'

'Then you don't think much of my views: at all events, they are intelligible enough.'

'On the contrary, I like your views. No woman ought to despise the golden spoon. If she has any refinement and good breeding, she likes the real thing: she knows vulgarity directly it appears,

and she hates that. But many women could be happy without it, though they don't think so. Many women dread love in a cottage, though they would be perfectly happy there: a great many more rush at it like children clutching at the moon, and get disillusioned directly afterwards.'

'The last part of that is cynical. Don't you believe in love in a cottage?'

'There's all the difference between words and deeds. The idea is delightful, but it is better suited to Arcadia than Great Britain. Here, unluckily, we get wet weather; and butchers want to be paid; and most of us are liable to fits of bad temper: and to top up with, very few of us realise what it means to deny ourselves anything. So it happens that very often the cottage remains, and the love doesn't. Such a number of people are

prepared for great sacrifices as long as they themselves don't have to make them.'

'I like the woman better who makes that mistake than the woman who sacrifices her happiness for the sake of your golden spoon. I can be sorry for the one ; not the other.'

'I think the latter is the less selfish of the two: one probably pleases herself against advice, the other only yields to temptation. The first ends by producing the greater amount of unhappiness at home.'

'You are encouraging me to try and catch the most eligible man I can find.'

'I am not. I say that many people could, if they only knew it, be perfectly happy living in a small way ; but a great many others, who couldn't, go and make absurd mistakes only because they are in love with a man.'

‘Freddy, if you were in love you would not be so wise. When people care for one another they aren’t frightened by a few difficulties.’

Freddy White flung himself back in his chair.

‘My dear Agatha,’ he exclaimed, ‘that’s so like a woman. You are all as dogmatic about love as an Archdeacon about theology. I like you for it, I admit: it’s a good fault, and a woman’s cynicism is horrible. But is it impossible for you to recognise a medium? You say a man cannot be in love if he takes a business-like view of it. Why not? Am I not in love because I hesitate to ask a woman to marry me till I know I can keep her? Am I not in love because I hesitate to ask a woman to give up all sorts of comforts for my sake?’

‘What does a woman care for comforts

compared with a man's affections? She doesn't consider them.'

'That's what I complain of. She ought to consider them. It's all right as long as she can sit and talk to him in her mother's morning-room; but they are not going to live in her mother's morning-room all their lives, with her mother's bell within reach, and her mother's footman at the other end.'

Agatha laughed.

'You do say odd things, Freddy. Official life has made you terribly cautious. Do you mean to say you would incur no risk for the sake of a woman you loved.'

'Every risk in the world: there is none I would not incur. But I would not let her incur one for my sake if I could help it. That's what I am driving at.'

'Come: I like that,' said Agatha. 'That's the nicest thing I have heard said for a long time.'

‘It is so hard to reconcile love and reason,’ he went on. ‘That’s why so many of us make a mess of it.’

‘But it mustn’t be all reason. You don’t want to do away with love matches, do you?’

‘I should like,’ said Freddy, ‘to trace all the people who got married at Gretna Green, and see how many of them were happy afterwards. I shouldn’t be surprised if they made a poor show compared, for instance, with marriage-mongering France.’

‘You unromantic creature! Women don’t like hearing love spoken of in that way. I expect you will think differently one day.’

‘I doubt it,’ said Freddy. ‘Do you know that soon after I came to London, I fell in love with a girl who danced at a theatre. I was madly in love, and I asked her to marry me. She happened to be a

sensible woman, and she refused. I didn't care two straws then what I sacrificed or what the future was to be. Yet I should have certainly got tired of her and our lives would have been a hell. Tell me now which sort of lover do you prefer; the lover I was then, or the lover I have been describing to you now.'

Agatha was grave.

'Were you really fond of her?' she asked.

'It depends on what you consider as being fond. I was prepared to quarrel with all my friends if I could only take her away and feel that she belonged to me. I made myself very wretched about her; but not half as wretched as we should both have been if we had been married?'

'Why are you so sure of that?'

'Because, my dear, she had nothing but

her face to recommend her. She was a good sort; that is why she would not marry me; but she had no mind at all. I, as you know, am interested in many things. We should have been very poor company for one another. She would have longed for the stage and its amusements, for we should have been poor and out of the reach of gaiety: I should have longed for the society from which I had exiled myself. We should have loathed one another and been supremely miserable: unless we had wisely agreed to separate. Yet I had been as much in love as any man in history or fiction.'

'That wasn't really being in love,' said Agatha.

'Then what is your definition of being in love?'

'When you find a person whom you

can't live without,' answered Agatha, readily.

'My dear Agatha, that person doesn't exist outside the novel. No man can say in sober earnest that he can't live without a certain woman. Many of my friends have been in love deep enough to satisfy your standard: they have been disappointed, yet they still live. Not one of them has died. "Men have died and worms have eaten them, but not for love": and I suppose it's the same with women.'

'Tell me, then,' said Agatha, 'what is your idea of being in love. I am curious to know.'

'Well,' said Freddy, 'I admit a lively effervescence; the result of fermentation: but that passes off. What concerns us is the foundation. You talk of a person you can't live without. I talk of a person

with whom you can be a great deal happier than you ever were before : someone to fill out your capacity for living.'

'And how do you know her—or him—as the case may be ?'

'When you feel an indescribable attraction, a love of uninterrupted companionship, complete faith, untainted respect.'

'But that is what a man in love always says he feels : how are you sure it is the right person.'

'You can't be. I don't suppose you can be sure of anything in this world. You must always chance it to a certain extent. No faith is safe from disillusion : love is no more trustworthy than religion, for instance. Some of the men who have loved the Church of England most, have ended by becoming Roman Catholics. There is nothing in which man's judgment is infallible : but what I maintain,

my dear Agatha, is that a man who can weigh the chances of happiness on every side is the most sensible and truest lover of all.'

They had drifted into this conversation unintentionally, and Freddy had entirely forgotten his ailments. Suddenly he was aware that the room was revolving on its own axis, and that Agatha was speaking from an ever-receding distance. It occurred to him then that he had better carry out his resolve of going upstairs. He recovered himself, and made the best excuse he could for leaving so abruptly.

'What's the matter?' exclaimed Agatha.
'You look dreadful.'

'Never mind: I shall be all right.'

'Won't you send for the doctor?'

'Oh, no. It's nothing much.'

Then I shall. I shall tell Aunt Jane as soon as she comes in.'

‘For Heaven’s sake, don’t,’ exclaimed Freddy: ‘I only want to be left alone;’ and, with a friendly nod, he left the room.

Agatha had plenty to think about now. First she was concerned about her cousin’s indisposition: furthermore they had been exchanging ideas on a topic which interested her profoundly, in common with the rest of her sex. Nothing fixes a rivet more firmly on an intimacy than a burst of confidence like this. There was much in what Freddy had said that she pondered over for its own sake; but there was much also in Freddy’s self that kept her thoughts in a pleasant groove.

Had Lady Jane known, as she drove home discoursing fluently, how happily the afternoon had passed with her dear niece, she would have been grievously disturbed: she would have regretted more than ever that she had not left Lord Morecombe

to entertain her. As it was, she bustled into the house in high good humour, her recent anger entirely forgotten. Tea was ready; everybody seemed satisfied with themselves; the hostess was pleased at having shown off the Abbey to advantage. She gave a spirited account of it all to Agatha.

‘The man was still there painting. I liked his picture better than I liked him. I wonder why artists prefer being dirty; it can’t make them paint any better. He had shabby clothes, and a horrible beard; his hat was covered with grease, and his boots were muddy. I wish you had been with us, Agatha. How is your head? I hope that wretch Freddy didn’t bore you? I daresay he made you play billiards or the piano to amuse him.’

‘No, he didn’t, Aunt Jane. He has gone to bed.’

‘Bed!’ exclaimed the lady. ‘What has he done that for?’

‘He isn’t at all well,’ said Agatha. ‘I wanted him to send for the doctor, but he wouldn’t.’

Lady Jane put down her cup and rose from her chair.

‘Poor dear boy, why didn’t he say so?’ she cried. ‘I must go and see what is the matter with him;’ with which she hurried upstairs.

She returned in a considerable flutter; declared Freddy was feverish, and sent immediately for the doctor. When he arrived it was declared that the patient certainly had a bad chill and must be nursed; from which moment Aunt Jane, for several days, came near to killing him with kindness.

With Freddy out of the way, Morecombe had a fair opportunity of enjoying Agatha’s

society. He was not conceited, but he was inexperienced, and he could not help feeling encouraged by her frankness. Many women flattered him, but he knew he was a duke's heir and an ugly one at that; and he was sceptical as to their sincerity. Agatha talked to him with such unaffected interest that she was unconsciously establishing herself in the shrine intended by Morecombe for his future duchess. He poured out his ideas upon politics, literature, and other great matters with astonishing eloquence. She listened intently; arguing, enquiring, praising. He would ruffle his shock head, whilst his eyes flashed behind his glasses. His complexion did not matter; it was a great mind unburdening itself, and Agatha's intellect was sufficiently sharp to seize on all that flowed forth in its exuberance.

Morecombe, after expounding the true

defence of Church establishment, or declaiming against the iniquity of some institution that had borne the test of more generations than he could number years, would reflect, as he dressed for dinner, that he had spoken well and had evidently impressed Miss Balstoun. She was the most sensible woman he had ever met. He wished, as he brushed his hair, that he was not quite so ugly, and could manage to look more like other people; but as long as she liked him so well, it really did not matter. So he talked away; told her of the difficulties of his constituency, confessed his ambitions, admitted his pride at his recent success in the House, and felt uncommonly happy. But never for one moment had he seen the look in Agatha's eyes that Freddy White had watched as he talked to her of home and

hopes and life's puzzles as they sat together in the library.

Poor Freddy was very bad, and his pious wish that he might be left alone was not to be fulfilled. Lady Jane could talk of nothing else at dinner, and no sooner was she out of the dining-room than she was off to ply him with linseed poultices. This went on at intervals all the evening: she gave him a second one rather soon because she had forgotten to put laudanum in the first. Nor were his troubles over then. He had fallen asleep: it was late and everyone had gone to bed. He might have expected peace; but there was no peace. From her apartment came Lady Jane, armed with linseed and laudanum; in an opposite direction there appeared a candle, behind which it was at first impossible to distinguish anyone: Lady Jane

approached it, and beheld her husband followed by Henry, the second footman, who carried a jug of hot water.

‘ Christopher,’ she exclaimed : ‘ what is that for?’

Mr. Diggle looked up and down, as if trying to recollect whether his house contained any secret outlets. Not calling any to mind he was obliged to answer.

‘ Henry has had experience as a masseur,’ he said, nervously, ‘ and I thought perhaps White might like to try the effect of a little massage and hot water.’

Lady Jane towered upwards in her wrath.

‘ If I ever hear of your laying a finger on anyone in this house, Henry, you shall leave it in twenty-four hours.’

The footman bowed with perfect urbanity and retired. Christopher Diggle wished he could do the same.

‘Aren’t you tired of your absurd craze?’ asked the wife, severely. ‘You make yourself perfectly ridiculous with it. Can’t you be content to drink your hot water without trying to force it upon everybody else?’

Mr. Diggle had nothing to say. Happily Lady Jane left him quickly, fearful lest her poultice should lose its undisputed efficacy by getting cold.

In spite of his amateur doctors, Freddy recovered, but the professional man declared he was in need of bracing air before going back to London. He advised a yachting cruise.

Morecombe was in the room when this was spoken of, and he at once made a proposal. ‘I want to go yachting,’ he said. ‘My father has lent me his yacht; it is supposed to be good for me. You get leave

from the Foreign Office, I'll get leave from the Whips, and we will have a cruise together.'

It sounded tempting, and Freddy declared he should like nothing better. Morecombe was an impulsive young man, and flew at his conclusion.

'I'll telegraph, and have the yacht brought round to meet us anywhere you like,' he cried, springing from the sofa. 'Where shall it be?'

'That depends where we are going, doesn't it?'

Morecombe's face beamed with new delight. 'I know,' he exclaimed. 'Let us go and see Jack Balstoun. Lady Jane, will you come? Let us all go. If we take the yacht and anchor off his island, he can't object. We shall have as good a right there as he has, and he can't refuse to see us if we go ashore.'

Agatha favoured him with the most appreciative glance she had ever bestowed on him ; the project delighted her. Lady Jane viewed it with approval, and, as nobody seemed to think Mr. Diggle's opinion worth having, the agreement was made without further demur.

CHAPTER VII.

A YACHTING PARTY.

WHEN Jack Balstoun heard that his island was to be invaded by a yachting-party, his excitement was great. He had now been living apart for many months, and one could begin to judge of how his resolution was likely to answer.

With regard to Mrs. Dasent, his feeling had not apparently changed ; he was still able to work himself into a fine state of melancholy when he reflected on his loss. Towards his father his animosity remained undiminished ; he had not a moment's

doubt that Sir John's conduct had been cruel and narrow-minded. The only suspicion that could suggest itself was a sneaking exhilaration at the prospect of visitors. He would not for worlds admit it to himself. We would perish, most of us, rather than inflict wanton deception on our dearest friend; but upon ourselves, whom we love best of all, we will impose with insane pertinacity.

Jack might have said to anyone else, 'It is quite true you have been grievously disappointed; time will mend that. It may be true that your father is a tyrant: probably he is much wiser than you are; anyhow, you are wrong to run away and sulk. In any case, this game you are playing can't last; nature may love solitude for herself, but she doesn't intend it for other people; you must give in soon: you are getting tired of it now.'

All this he might have impressed upon another: to himself he would admit none of it. The bare idea of wavering would be an aspersion on his consistency; young men often confuse consistency and obstinacy. Therefore he swept the notion of pleasure from his mind as best he could, and determined that this visit was a monstrous infliction; an outrage on privacy. He wrote a frigid reply, plainly stating that he neither desired nor expected to see anyone. This he gave to Matt to take ashore.

‘I hear some of my people are coming here on a yacht,’ he said.

‘Why, that will be splendid, sir. We’ll show them what a place we’ve made of it.’

‘But don’t you understand that I don’t want to see anybody? I explained that to you, didn’t I?’

Matthew pulled his beard and surveyed his handiwork in silence. He had certainly produced order out of chaos ; he might well be proud of his garden.

‘ I have written to say I don’t want them,’ said Jack.

‘ It’s worth seeing, Mr. Jack, that it is : but it wasn’t to be expected anyone would come.’

Jack turned the letter in his hand.

‘ I don’t know that it’s fair on you, Matt, after all the trouble you’ve taken. Perhaps I’d better let them come,’ he said, conscious of internal trepidation.

‘ No, Mr. Jack, a bargain’s a bargain. Don’t break rules on my account ; give me the letter.’

Jack felt a hypocrite as he handed it over, though he would have been indignant if anyone had accused him of it. The letter went, and he felt that he had acted

firmly. But he began to await Matthew's return from shore every day with growing unrest.

'I shall be glad to know they have taken the hint and aren't coming,' he said.

Matthew came back empty-handed once or twice.

'I wish to goodness they would write and settle it,' he said. 'It is too bad of them worrying me like this.'

Next day a letter came. He tore it open and turned away to read it. He walked some way along the shore, whilst Matthew made fast the boat. When he came back his face revealed a strong feeling of some sort.

'It is a great shame,' he said, deliberately; 'they insist upon coming. Look to your garden, Matt: they will be here in two days.'

During those two days, Jack was as restless as a child. He could settle to nothing: he read little, and delayed Matthew in his work by the frequency of his observations, addressed partly to his companion, partly to himself. Their purport was that he was angry at his friends' intended visit, and that he was determined to observe an implacable coldness towards them. This he continued to repeat, as if it were a lesson he had to learn. The nearer the hour of arrival came, the more valiant grew his asseverations: the brighter also the flash of his eye and the tinge on his cheek. When a strip of smoke on the sky-line betokened the approach of the yacht, he delivered himself of a violent ejaculation of wrath, and then watched her with breathless eagerness.

She came sweeping through the short waves to her anchorage, and Jack could

distinguish his sister with glasses up looking for him. Impulsively he drew out his handkerchief and waved it: then he wished he hadn't, and sat down to wait as impassively as he could. He could see them all now: Morecombe, Aunt Jane, Agatha, Freddy White. He heard the skipper give the word to let go the anchor; a boat was lowered, and in five minutes his sister was standing before him with her arms round his neck. It required a strong effort to maintain his formality as he received his guests. They were all so genial: except Lady Jane: she began at once.

‘I never saw such a madman. Why didn't you go to Colney Hatch, if you wanted to go anywhere? You would have been much more comfortable, and it wouldn't have been such a business coming to see you.’

‘I didn't expect anyone would take the

trouble to come and see me,' said Jack, stiffly.

'I don't suppose you did. I am sure you don't deserve it. Let me look at you: for goodness sake, boy, cut off that beard: you look like a wild man of the woods. However a nephew of mine can have come to such a state of things, I don't know. Balstoun is an out-of-the-way place enough; you might have been satisfied with that. I don't see you do yourself or anybody else any good by coming here.'

Agatha meanwhile was moving about like a spirit of happiness that had suddenly alighted on the island. She had darted into the hut, shaken hands with Matt, made him grin with delight at her praises of his garden, tripped out to the top of the high ground, and now hastened back enraptured.

'Jack, it's a perfect paradise. It's no

good trying to keep it to yourself: we shall all come and stay with you: you must begin building at once. Matt, what is this flower? I never saw it at Balstoun.'

Morecombe beamed through his spectacles: he was enjoying himself: he knew nothing of the plot underlying this pretty farce. They went indoors, and found everything delightful—except Aunt Jane, who could not be pacified. She was bent on finding fault.

'You might just as well have furnished one of the dog kennels at Balstoun: it would have saved a lot of trouble. What in the world's this?' she added.

There was an uncomfortable pause: she had pulled up in front of the corner sacred to Mrs. Dasent. She ceased her comments; examined closely; then moved on, saying nothing.

Agatha left the room, followed by More-

combe : Freddy White went and talked to Matt.

Jack was looking out of the window towards the yacht. Suddenly he felt a hand on his shoulder, and found himself being kissed by his aunt.

‘Why didn’t you come to me instead of burying yourself alive? You mustn’t think you have got no friends till we have all been tried and found wanting. Come and make your home with us, Jack, if you want a change: you’ll always be welcome.’

It was said with a warmth of affection which took him by surprise. He allowed himself to be drawn on to a sofa by his aunt’s side, and, contrary to all resolve, almost against his will, he let flow a stream of confidence too long pent up within him.

Morecombe and Agatha were sitting

apart, the former enlarging on the probable effects of social isolation.

‘I daresay your brother,’ he said, ‘when he leaves here—if he does leave, as I hope he will—will be all the better for it. I often wish I could get a spell of quiet like this to get up things. He will have a number of advantages; the pleasure of contrast, a freshness that we haven’t got, and a store of information which he has been laying in all the time.’

‘He is very sensitive,’ said Agatha, ‘I am afraid he would be shy of going amongst people and being looked upon as eccentric.’

‘He needn’t fear. If people know about it at all, they will forget it in a few weeks. No one cares in London for what you’ve done; only for what you are going to do. Is he fond of politics?’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Agatha.

‘He ought to be. He must leave this and stand for the county. I know there are two divisions without candidates. We will draw him at dinner.’

‘If you could induce him to go and stand, Lord Morecombe, I should be so grateful.’

She looked full in his face, thinking not of him but of her brother. The young politician felt the blood mounting to his temples: he vowed Jack should be on a platform with him before the end of the month. Agatha shook her head: she thought her brother would be slow in his surrender.

‘Do try, Lord Morecombe,’ she said.

Freddy watched them from a bench before the house-door. His had been an unenviable part to play. He recognised the fact that he was in love with his cousin, and he felt the hopelessness of his

position. He had known her from childhood; had watched her grow up into the perfection of womanhood. Now he saw her surrounded by admirers over whom her aunt kept severe watch and ward. It was easy enough to see that Morecombe was the selected candidate: Freddy had known that for some time. Consequently, on the yacht, his position had been invidious. Powerful as was the temptation to fling himself at his cousin's feet, prudence and the sense of hospitality had checked him. They had only been a party of four, and, by irony of circumstance, Lady Jane, who had habitually abused Freddy for years, was now obliged to discover a sudden pleasure in his company. She revealed a passion for certain disgusting games resembling mathematical problems, and for hours at a time the unhappy young man would be pinned to a game of reversi

or halma, whilst his eyes wandered off to the spot where his host and his cousin were stretched side by side in long deck chairs.

Stout as was Jack's resolve to yield nothing in his aloofness, he consented to dine on board.

'We evidently can't all get in here,' Aunt Jane had said. 'We will have tea in your garden, but we won't expect you to give us dinner.'

'You would expect it still less if you saw our larder, Aunt Jane,' he said.

'But of course you'll dine on board,' said Morecombe. 'Have all your meals there: come away with us too.'

Jack showed no disposition to trifle. He said he would dine: that was enough.

It was a strange experience to ride over the smooth waters towards the ship's lights: it was many a day since he had dined out. It was many a day since he

had dined at all in the sense in which the word is used in polite society. To a man brought up as Jack had been, dinner is not a meal so much as a social observance. It is the moment when, the day's work being done, men and women prepare themselves for whatever charm is to be found in luxury, ease, and the unfolding of intellectual resources. A meal eaten hap-hazard in one's day attire is at best a meal: it is eating, not dining. Jack had eaten food every evening on the island: he had not dined.

He now found himself sitting at a neatly laid table; a shaded light above him; the sound of pleasant voices in his ears. The secret charm of sociability would be felt, and all the Sybarite that was in him broke out. Freddy White was telling a remarkable story of how he nearly got ploughed for the Civil Service by forgetting his own name. He had done a splendid history paper,

so he said, and, when the man came to take it, he saw he had not put his name at the top. In the flurry of the moment he could recollect nothing beyond the fact that his father's Christian name had been William. This last notion struck Jack as so exceedingly comic that he broke into a shout of laughter. It was positively the first time he had laughed for months, and the sound almost alarmed him. He felt, with infinite vexation, that he was thoroughly enjoying himself.

Morecombe's idea of working on Jack's feelings was not very happy; a clever man need not be the best tactician.

'When are you coming into the House of Commons?' he asked, presently, thinking the right moment had arrived.

Jack froze at once.

'I have no idea of going into Parliament,' he said.

‘Oh, but you must. There are two divisions of your county without candidates. You are the obvious man.’

‘As I intended to live here,’ said Jack, ‘I am afraid I can’t.’

‘But you won’t stay here for ever, I suppose.’

This was jumping on dangerous ground with a vengeance ; Freddy White came to the rescue.

‘I was staying with your friend, Archie Price,’ he said, ‘a little while ago. He wanted to know how you were, and told me to send you his love if I had a chance. He said he understood you meant to stay here, but if by any chance you had to go home, he wants you to go and see him.’

All this was pure fiction. Mr. Price had spoken with profound contempt of his friend’s conduct ; had expressed his opinion that Jack was an ass of a poor type. But

Freddy had not been trained in diplomacy for nothing. He knew that the best way to get round Jack was to take him seriously, and he began accordingly to discuss his situation with great gravity; well aware that if his kinsman gave way at all, it must be with his own approbation, and not in consciousness of his absurdity.

‘Have you written anything lately?’ he enquired presently, as seriously as he might have asked the same thing of Professor Flap.

They had gone on deck, and Jack was enjoying the moment when life appears most rosy—the joint effect of a cigarette and a luxurious chair, supervening on a good dinner. Even our heroes have a strain of the animal left; let us admit it at once.

‘I have done one or two short things,’ he answered, contentedly. ‘I shan’t try anything in the way of a book yet.’

‘Are you going to publish them?’ asked Freddy.

‘I don’t know,’ said Jack. ‘I don’t want to get mixed up with journalism.’

It occurred to Freddy that this was precisely what many young men were striving ineffectually to accomplish, and Jack’s lofty disdain rather tried his gravity.

‘I shouldn’t be in a hurry,’ he said. ‘You can take your time and produce something startling by-and-by.’

Jack found his cousin a charming companion ; so sympathetic and sensible.

‘How have you been getting on?’ he asked, in an outbreak of friendliness.

‘Much as usual,’ said Freddy, lazily. ‘I often envy you your life ; one gets tired of the same grind year after year. I can’t imagine anything nicer than having a place like this to hide in, taking an occasional dash about the country, just to

keep one's mind awake and one's spirits up. There's plenty of fun to be had in the world if one sets about it properly. We are most of us slaves to habit: we do things because other people do them, or because we've done them for so long that we must go on. I believe the secret of appreciating life is to do what you feel inclined, without caring a straw for other people's opinions, or being bound by your own prejudices.'

'It doesn't do to give up a thing when you've once made up your mind to do it. It argues a poor spirit,' said Jack.

'It argues a much poorer one to be afraid of doing a thing because of possible criticisms. Don't you think so?'

Jack made no answer; he was wondering whether, after all, he was justified in enjoying himself so much. Aunt Jane had not proposed a game this evening, and

had begun to harangue Morecombe upon certain points of abstract right. As Agatha was familiar with her aunt's views she took the opportunity of going to a seat by her brother's side. She took his hand in hers.

‘Dear old Jack, I am so glad to see you,’ she said. ‘I found Balstoun dreadfully dull without you.’

He said nothing, but held her hand.

‘Poor father finds it lonely, I fancy,’ she went on. ‘He has been alone nearly all the winter. One result is, he is making improvements everywhere. It seems to me he is redraining and refencing every farm in the place.’

‘It is an ill wind that blows no one good,’ said Jack. ‘The tenants ought to be grateful to me.’

‘Mr. Tracer says the property will be in better order than any in England presently,’ said Agatha.

‘So much the better for my father’s successors,’ said Jack, stoutly.

Agatha ignored the point of this.

‘It’s a great business,’ she said. ‘I wish he had some one to help him.’

‘There’s Mr. Tracer,’ said Jack.

‘That is different: I mean one belonging to him.’

‘Well, there’s Arthur. He is as much interested as anybody now.’

‘He never goes to Balstoun. I don’t know why.’

‘Sir John seems to have a knack of driving away his male relations,’ said Jack.

‘Oh, Jack; there are enough troubles in the world without making fresh ones. One doesn’t mend troubles by quarrelling.’

‘I didn’t say father and Arthur had quarrelled,’ said Jack, evasively.

‘But it is so sad to see that lovely place deserted. All the trees and the flowers

coming out, everything at its best, and nobody there to enjoy it. Why can't we live there and be happy as we used to do.'

'One can't forget some things, Agatha. I have done with Balstoun.'

'Dear Jack,' she pleaded, 'I know how unhappy you have been; nobody is more sorry for you than I am; but I can't believe it is hopeless. Surely your affection for home would have helped you to forget your other troubles.'

'I couldn't bear the sight of it,' he said. 'I don't want to hear it spoken of.'

'Don't you care to know whether Maxey has invented any new flowers; or whether it is going to be a good fruit year; or whether your creeper has gone on growing as you hoped it would; or whether there are any new sea birds on the lake this year. You can't have lost all interest in what you were so fond of.'

‘I shall never see them again, so it doesn’t matter,’ said Jack, fiercely.

‘Your rooms are exactly as you left them,’ she said. ‘Nothing has been touched.’ He made no answer, and she went on. ‘I found father sitting there one day alone. He won’t show it, but I know how much he misses you, Jack.’

Jack changed the subject quickly.

‘Maxey wrote to me one day about some bulbs, but I didn’t answer him. He would come here to show them to me, I believe, if I gave him the least encouragement.’

‘I don’t think he would,’ said Agatha. ‘He is too much wrapped up in the gardens at home. He wants to be allowed to pull down your kennels and put glass-houses there instead.’

‘I’m hanged if he does,’ cried Jack, suddenly starting forward. ‘Tell him I won’t have the kennels touched.’

Agatha leaned towards him and laughed lightly.

‘Promise to come and see them soon,’ she said, ‘and I will undertake to keep them safe meanwhile.’

She felt she had touched a weak spot, and won a point in her attack.

Before he went ashore, Jack was induced to promise that he would come on board next day, and go for a cruise. It was in a state of self-reproach that he passed an hour in his arm-chair before going to bed. He had shown a childish want of character. Instead of letting these people see that they disturbed his seclusion, he had displayed the pleasure of a boy who receives a visit at school. He looked at Mrs. Dasent’s portrait and charged himself with disloyalty: he had no right to be cheerful in her absence, and in her distress. He had learnt from Arthur that

they had found the bird flown when they arrived in Australia. Mrs. Dasent, he understood, would remain there until she had exhausted every hope of tracing her husband: what she would do then had not at present been decided. So Jack sat alone fortifying with stout resolutions his determination to shun the world: to have neither part nor lot with any of his kind.

And yet he was conscious of unwonted spirit when he woke next morning: it seemed as if there were some object in getting up: the day seemed a little brighter and the birds sang more cheerfully than usual. There was the yacht lying outside: she had swung round with the tide since last night. She looked uncommonly smart, and there was no denying it; he looked forward to his day's adventure.

Morecombe himself came ashore to fetch

his guest. Nothing could be warmer than Morecombe's cordiality; it increased as the day wore on. Probably his lordship had two reasons for courting Jack Bals-toun; first, the avowed object of drawing him into public life; second, the half-unconscious inclination to make much of anybody connected with Agatha. She had begged him again to devote himself to Jack, and in her case again the motive was twofold. She undoubtedly desired to rescue Jack, but she had also become aware of the fact that Lord Morecombe was in love with her, and that he was being encouraged in his advances by Aunt Jane. She felt frightened, and began to regret her rashness in coming here. She had entertained no scruple about accepting his invitation; now she began to fear she had done an injudicious thing.

To-day, happily, Morecombe was contented to monopolise Jack. He spoke with

such enthusiasm about public life that Jack could not help listening with interest. He talked of their schoolfellows who had already begun a career: related how he and another old Etonian had held a platform against an uproarious meeting in the north; told, in fact, such stirring tales of adventure that the chivalrous spirit of his friend was considerably roused.

‘It’s a fine thing,’ he said at the end. ‘I envy you, Morecombe; but it is not in my line. *Quot homines tot sententice*: I prefer this.’

‘It’s very nice as far as it goes,’ said Morecombe. ‘No one appreciates quiet now and then more than I do; but you have got too much sense, Jack, to allow yourself to consider this life large enough.’

‘We shall see,’ said Jack. ‘I daresay fifty years hence I shall be a happier man than many of you fellows.’

‘Very likely,’ said Morecombe, ‘because

by that time you'll either be living amongst us or you won't be living at all.'

Jack shook his head solemnly, and they went aft. Lady Jane was disposed to sleep; Agatha and Freddy had been talking comfortably apart. It was not often they were left undisturbed like this, and they made the most of it. She had been watching her brother for some time.

'Do you think he will come?' she said. 'Lord Morecombe tries very hard to persuade him, doesn't he?'

'He will probably succeed. He is one of those lucky chaps who bring off everything he tries.'

'It's because he is determined. Many men without his advantages would succeed in the same way, if they were as persevering.'

'Do you think people can always get what they want as long as they persevere?' asked Freddy, absently.

‘I believe so,’ said Agatha.

‘Suppose two men are trying for the same thing,’ suggested Freddy, ‘what then? They can’t both succeed.’

‘I suppose,’ laughed Agatha, ‘the one who persevered hardest would win.’

‘And the other one would ascribe it to luck, wouldn’t he?’

‘Probably,’ said Agatha. ‘But he would be wrong.’

‘I take it as a hopeful sign,’ said Freddy, ‘that Jack is better dressed to-day than he was yesterday. He received us as if we had come for a day’s rat-hunting. He is smarter to-day: to-morrow he will be shaved. I expect he is asking for the ship’s barber now.’

‘Or the ship’s cook,’ suggested Aunt Jane, waking up and catching the last sentence. ‘Isn’t it time for lunch?’

CHAPTER VIII.

ITS EFFECT UPON JACK.

THE yacht stayed at Windlaw a week, during which time Jack so far broke his resolution as to spend all his days in the cheerful society to be found on board. Matthew Taylor surveyed him one morning with astonishment.

‘Why, Mister Jack,’ he said, ‘it’s done you a power o’ good seeing company. I’d like to have yachting-parties here regular once a month.’

‘I shouldn’t, Matt,’ answered Jack, shortly. ‘It is just what I don’t want, a stream of visitors: one might as well be

anywhere else. They are a confounded nuisance.'

Matthew Taylor was taken in. He was not given to close observation, and he at once accepted the idea that Jack took this invasion amiss.

'Things is never so bad, sir, but what they might be worse,' he said, in his old formula.

'I don't see how that affects the case, Matt, unless indeed we had two yachts here instead of one,' said Jack, a little mollified at his own facetiousness. 'But it has annoyed me. Now that these people have been here we shall have others trying to come. I shall put my foot down next time, and refuse to see them.'

He finished his breakfast and went out. The yacht was to sail early; it was time for adieux. Somehow the morning was not so fair, and the birds sang less cheer-

fully. He went to the landing-stage, and, not caring to wait for the gig, pulled off in his own boat. Morecombe was on deck engaged with the skipper.

‘Good morning,’ he said, ‘I will come in one minute: we are settling our course.’

He and Jack had been engaged in a fierce argument over-night about female suffrage, and Morecombe was anxious to resume. But it was like the remains of an over-night feast: the zest had been exhausted; what remained was stale and dry.

Jack made a futile effort to pretend he was still interested: in truth he wanted to go below and talk to his relations. Morecombe, in spite of his spectacles, was blind to this fact: he considered it all-important to keep alive the political fervour which he believed he had awakened. Jack fidgetted under his fire of oratory until the ship’s bell sounded the hour. Then he rose.

‘I must go and see my aunt,’ he said, ‘or she will be offended.’

Morecombe looked at his watch.

‘I didn’t know it was so late. They haven’t finished breakfast yet: let us go down. But remember,’ he said, ‘you must come and stay with me, and we will finish our argument.’

Jack shook his head and followed in silence. They found the others at breakfast. Lady Jane looked up from her paper, fresh from shore, and exclaimed,

‘So you’ve come: I thought you would let us leave without saying good-bye.’

‘I kept him on deck, Lady Jane,’ said Morecombe. ‘We haven’t done our dispute yet, so he has promised to come and stay at home to finish it.’

Jack ignored this. He kissed his sister, then sat down; in spite of his character of philosopher he felt dispirited.

‘Anyhow you can write, Jack,’ said Freddy, who persisted in respecting the hermit propensity. ‘I will write and tell you anything that’s likely to interest you.’

‘I shall only have society gossip,’ said Agatha, ‘so I suppose it’s no use my writing.’

‘Nonsense,’ said Jack. ‘Write to me often.’

‘If you don’t show yourself in Grosvenor Square,’ said Aunt Jane, ‘before July, I’ll write to you and say what I think.’

‘I expect I shall be glad of my insular position,’ said Jack. ‘I shall feel safe from your anger with water all around me.’

‘Don’t be so sure of that. I daresay I shall send my butler to bring you away.’

‘Anyhow, we’ve had a splendid week here,’ said Morecombe. ‘You haven’t asked us to come again, but you didn’t

ask us to come before, so we needn't wait for an invitation.'

The hour for departure came : there were some sturdy grasps of the hand, a clinging embrace from Agatha, and Jack was left in his boat dancing in the wash of the receding steamer. He did not row ashore at once. Matt watched him sitting still with his eyes fixed on the long stream of smoke fading away towards the south. He remained there till the last vestige had died away ; then he roused himself, and pulled briskly for the shore.

'Now, Matt,' he said, 'we are quit of them. I can get to my books again.'

'I don't see as there's much sense in books compared with live beings such as them,' was Matt's comment as he turned to his work.

It was observable during the ensuing days that Jack was less restful than had

been his habit. He would change his book and his seat repeatedly. He seemed to be not much interested in what he read, his thoughts evidently wandered. Honest Matthew feared his master had really been inconvenienced by late events.

‘I fear that party have upset you a bit, Mr. Jack. You seem to fidget since they was here.’

Jack was affronted.

‘I’m not fidgetting. It has not made any difference to me; not the slightest.’

He repudiated the idea of unrest. He had made up his mind long ago: the sight of three or four friends was not likely to unmake it. They had interrupted him, and it would take a few days to get back into regular habits; that was all.

To do him justice Jack was making a gallant fight. It may have been rank obstinacy; perhaps he was suffering in a

worthless cause : but he considered his character for consistency was at stake, and he was battling nobly in the face of an over-powering inclination.

He was regaining his normal state of mind. Time had worn out, as everyone capable of judging must have anticipated, the artificial aversion from familiar things which intense grief had implanted. The process had been going on continually. It had been far advanced before he had heard anything of Morecombe's yacht. It had culminated under the healing influence of happy associations. He had ignored the reaction at first ; suppressed it successfully at a later stage. If he were to prevent it now, it would require remarkable will, aided by all the flame he could still keep burning in the ashes of his cooling passion. He sat down to a tough ordeal of self-discipline.

No reader, however strict or sentimental, can fairly charge Jack with faithlessness. A man may be ever so much in love, and yet not think it necessary to bury himself alive. By no means : if he be a wise man he will even make his daily life all the better for it, in spite of disappointment.

‘ ’Tis better to have loved and lost,
Than never to have loved at all.’

The words are hackneyed ; but only hackneyed because they are true. A worthy love affair, though it be wholly unsuccessful, colours one’s life ; paints in a serene and beautiful background for eyes that are discerning. Jack would certainly be a more attractive figure holding up his head manfully in the world, than hugging his sorrows alone at Windlaw. He may have considered himself much aggrieved by Sir John’s conduct : but if every son and heir who falls at cross pur-

poses with his father were to go away and sulk, there would be a dearth of them in society: they would be harder pressed than ever; and their young brothers would have a chance.

Jack felt Mrs. Dasent's loss very keenly yet; it had made a deeper impression than a sceptical generation would imagine. The hysterical emotion had subsided; the legitimate devotion remained. He still considered he had received scant kindness at his father's hands, but he was beginning to think that a dignified protest might have done as well as a childish freak of rage. He had inherited his father's pride of self, and the idea of admitting his folly was painful. He would not give in until he was wholly convinced, and found a plausible pretext. He sought security in work, and finding that his mind wandered from what he read, he returned to his writing.

A treatise on socialism appeared the right theme to begin on. He took as his text the old distich,

‘ When Adam delved, and Eve span,
Where was then the gentleman ?’

The query, he pointed out, was inappropriate, inasmuch as society at that moment was not in a highly developed state, and the gentleman was present in embryo in Eden as much as any other human character. He went through the entire list of risings and revolutions with which he was acquainted, from the revolt of the Peasants to the Chartist riots, with a disquisition on the greatest of all object lessons provided by France. He argued that socialism was as old as history, and as impracticable as perpetual motion : it had been attempted many times, and whatever it had achieved at the moment, had as surely been undone again. This

brought him to his own case. Let a community be limited to a very small number—two for choice—and such a thing might be feasible. Common aims, common tastes, complete integrity, and mutual confidence were indispensable elements; but when more than two or three people were gathered together, this combination must recede into an abstract idea. As the world was constituted it was inaccessible. We must realize that within certain limits society must remain as it stands, and it is our business to make the best of it by playing, each of us, our allotted part to the best of our ability. It is an intensely practical world, and we must be practical people; faddists and sentimentalists are as dangerous as rogues and vagabonds.

Jack reeled off these ideas with growing confidence. He was sitting on a grass plot behind his little house, a shady pine

screening him from the sun's rays : the waves broke refreshingly upon the beach, a cheerful thrush was rehearsing in a thicket. Jack's pen sped across the paper, and he felt more interest in his work than he had ever felt before. He would have liked an audience : there was a sudden craving for a brush with men ; the instinct for work and action. He pushed his hat back from his forehead, and prepared to read what he had written. It ran smoothly enough : he scored through a few dozen adverbs and adjectives, cut out many redundant sentences with impartiality, and generally cleared it up. The facts were in good order and intelligibly stated ; the conclusion certainly appeared just. Then came the final passage concerning the duty of the individual in his own sphere, and he almost licked his lips as he read it.

A celebrated literary canon occurred to

him, whereby young writers are enjoined to stop at every sentence they consider particularly good, and cut it out. He would not readily cut out this one, he thought. But whilst he was relishing the flavour of the concluding lines, the truth flashed upon him that he had stultified himself by his own words. Who amongst mortals had ever more flagrantly disregarded his own vocation in life than Jack Balstoun? Who had ever deserted his post more deliberately or flown straighter in the face of circumstances? He had proved himself a faddist, a sentimentalist, and a violator of human laws. He sprung from his chair, and walked to the water's edge. He saw that he was wavering at heart, and he knew he was a hypocrite: it was the former weakness that put him to shame.

He stayed some time kicking stones into

the water and watching them settle in their beds. Then he turned abruptly back, collected some dry sticks, and made a bonfire, on the top of which he laid his manuscript. With a sick heart, he saw the paper turn brown, curl up, flame a little, and finally subside in gray ashes. Anyone who has had a taste for writing, knows what that cost him; nobody who has not felt the passion can possibly understand; explanation is therefore useless.

After this, Jack took a turn at Matthew's work. He went to the furthest point of the island and began to clear a space without any definite object beyond occupation. All day long his axe rang steadily, until Matt listened in amazement. At evening he came in with his hands covered with blisters. He could hardly hold his knife and fork, and Matt had to tend him like a child. Next day he could do nothing, and in the

afternoon set an unheard-of precedent by proposing a game of piquet, an accomplishment which he had imparted to his companion for their evening recreation. Matthew Taylor by no means approved of this; and on the following day, when the same thing happened, he pleaded work as an excuse.

Jack looked about the house and wished he had got something to do. Finally he hit upon a light novel that had got here by accident, and had been left neglected all this time. He read it through, and resolved to send ashore for more like it. But this was not what he wanted; they brought him no peace: he could think of nothing but his own affairs, and what a bad plight they were in.

One morning the crisis came. Matt was clearing away breakfast, when Jack exclaimed—

‘Matt, I don’t think it’s good enough, after all ; I’m off.’

‘Off, Mr. Jack? Where to?’

‘Home, Matthew. Balstoun Castle, London town. Everywhere other people go. Windlaw isn’t big enough.’

Matthew Taylor put down his burden of plates.

‘Why, lor’ bless me!’ he muttered, slowly. ‘Just as we were making the island quite a picture.’

‘So it is, Matt; but it’s rather too much of a miniature for me. You won’t be sorry to see Balstoun again.’

‘I sha’n’t be sorry to see folks again, sir: no, I shall be glad enough of that. But there isn’t the same chance for a man there. There’s something to be proud of in this kind of work ;’ and he waved his hand towards the window.

‘Well, we won’t give it up altogether,’

said Jack. 'You shall marry and come and live here, if you like, and I'll bring people to stay here sometimes.'

This idea appeared to be acceptable: Matt went on clearing away breakfast.

'When do you mean to start, sir?' he said.

'To-day, Matt. You must take me ashore this afternoon. Then you can pack up, and follow as soon as you choose.'

He had hardly intended to decide like this: the words had suddenly come to his lips, and, once uttered, he thought he might as well abide by them. It was like the relief of drawing a bad tooth; a chronic, gnawing pain had gone from him, and he felt himself suddenly free. Now that he had made the plunge he was impatient to act. He went direct to his room, and began packing such things as he immediately required. He then went to the

sitting-room, where he locked up in various drawers the entire modest stock of ornaments. Only Mrs. Dasent's corner he left untouched. He went into the garden and picked some wild flowers and roses, which he laid before the large photograph. One small Indian charm he put on to his watch-chain ; everything else was allowed to remain.

Then, with a last steady look at the curious collection, he drew a curtain over all. Whatever happened, or wherever he went, this corner of the world should, at all events, be inviolate. It should remain a sanctuary, perhaps for his thoughts only ; possibly for bodily retreat also. In a way, it would serve as an embodiment of an ideal ; and, if life promised nothing better, that at least was a fair token to carry with him.

He was too much excited at his future

prospects to feel much regret as he stepped on board and bade farewell to Windlaw.

‘Ain’t she a beauty, sir?’ said Matt, as he set the sails and the boat swung with the breeze. ‘Lor’, sir, I can’t hardly bear parting with her and letting things run down.’

‘You don’t want to stay quite alone, Matt?’ inquired Jack.

‘I don’t know, sir: I suppose not.’ Then he added, reflectingly, ‘Things is never so bad but what they might be worse.’

‘Never mind, Matt. We’ll come and picnic here several times a year. We’ll bring parties to see your gardens. Lock up everything before you leave, and make things as safe as you can. If they are stolen it can’t be helped.’

They went ashore, and called a cab for Jack’s luggage. He had not landed during all this time; the first impression of

street life was exhilarating: he felt much like a yokel who pays a first visit to London.

‘Drive to the station, Matt,’ he said.
‘I will meet you there.’

He set off walking with a brisk step, evidently in search of something. He passed down the street examining each shop front as it came in sight. His clothes were very well; these boots he had hardly worn at Windlaw; even his hat was respectable. He would hardly need any outfit at the moment. Presently he shot across the road and revealed his purpose. He disappeared within a door underneath a gaily striped pole; and in ten minutes he emerged shorn of his fair beard. His hair was cut—it had hitherto been mown by Matt—and Jack reappeared as his former self, neat and trim; perhaps more bronzed, broader, and firmer knit with his

spell of strong breezes and healthy living.

He had a tiresome journey before him. Trains had no consideration for his line of travel; they went slowly, stopped frequently, had no communication with others at changing stations; and he had to sleep with tolerable discomfort at a small town in the Lowlands. At all events he could get on early next day, and at noon he was standing on the platform of the Balstoun station. He had undergone a curious sensation during the last few hours. The burning affection for home, familiar in his school-days, blazed up within him; he almost choked with emotion at first sight of the square towers and spreading beech-trees of Balstoun. He could have rushed up the avenue and flung himself on the grey stones in abject love of the place. And yet there lurked in him the shame of the prodigal son. He had it in him to banish

anger and seek reconciliation with his father. And yet—to eat humble pie, to admit himself in the wrong, was hard; to risk rebuff, to find no response on the Baronet's part, would have been harder still.

Suppressing his excitement as best he could, he gave a friendly 'Good-day' to station-master and coachman, who manifested great pleasure at the sight of him; and drove home. He had telegraphed in the morning to announce his arrival. Sir John had had short notice. Would he be excited for once? Jack hoped so with all his heart. A little effusiveness on his father's part—it need not have been much—would probably have thrown down every barrier of constraint. He sprang from the carriage.

'Where is Sir John?' he asked of the footman.

‘In his room, sir.’

Jack could feel his heart thumping under his ribs as he strode off. So full was he of pleasure and happiness that he could have swept all old scores off the slate at once. As he crossed the hall he met his father. Impulsively he framed a speech of manly apology; but Sir John anticipated him.

‘Good-morning, Jack. You made an odd journey. Why didn’t you come by the mail?’

He might have been talking to somebody who had been away for a couple of days; friend, relation, servant; anyone almost, except his only son, whose late history had been so peculiar. Jack shrivelled up. All his enthusiasm dropped dead, and he met his parent on his own ground.

‘I hadn’t made up my mind where I

was going, and it ended in my having to get whichever train I could.'

'I'm very glad to see you. Have you enjoyed yourself? You look all the better for your stay in the middle of the sea.'

'It's a very healthy place.'

'I heard about it from Agatha.'

'They stayed a week with me.'

'She came here on the way back. Then she went to London. I don't know whether she will be here again for the present.'

'I shall see her,' said Jack. 'I am going to London.'

'Are you?' exclaimed Sir John. 'I am glad of that.'

'I only came here to get some clothes. I thought of going on to-night.'

'Well, let us have some lunch now, at all events.'

This, then, was how he returned home ;

this was the result of his attempt to throw himself back into affectionate sympathy with his father. They went into the beautiful dining-room with its oak walls, its array of portraits, and its glorious view of green country; and there they found Miss Mirabel, not an unattractive addition to the scene. Jack had given her little thought of late: she had begun to disappear from his estimate of life. Suddenly it struck him that she was a considerable item in the establishment. She welcomed him with the unaffected cordiality of an old friend.

‘It was a delightful surprise to get your telegram. We have been dreadfully excited all the morning, haven’t we, Sir John?’

Sir John, who was carving a chicken, nodded approval, and the tone of the conversation at once assumed an ease which

rather puzzled the newcomer. He found himself learning all about his home from this lady who used to be all modesty and self-effacement, who now appeared to be very much mistress of the situation, and employed more than once the pronoun 'we.'

'It was sad losing Agatha again,' she went on. 'We miss her dreadfully. Fortunately she has quite got over her accident: really, Mr. Jack, it might have been very serious.'

'I believe you behaved splendidly, Miss Mirabel. Agatha says that you did wonders.'

Miss Mirabel laughed.

'After all, I only contrived to save myself; not her,' she said.

There was an awkwardness apparent when he inquired for Arthur.

'He is in London, I believe,' said Sir John.

‘Is he coming here?’ asked Jack.

‘Not that I know of.’

‘Hasn’t he been here lately?’ he persisted.

‘Captain Balstoun has quite deserted us,’ said Miss Mirabel. ‘He positively hasn’t been here since he came back from Australia.’

‘Why not?’ asked Jack, in amazement.

‘I don’t know,’ said Miss Mirabel, carelessly. ‘I suppose it bores him.’

Jack was astonished at the tone and substance of this remark. He looked at his father, but the Baronet evidently intended to say nothing; so Jack resolved to pay an early visit to Uncle Arthur upon his arrival in London, and ask the question direct.

CHAPTER IX.

JACK'S FIRST EXPERIENCE OF LONDON.

ARTHUR BALSTOUN lived in a street running out of St. James's Square. He did not possess the modern passion for elegance which has greatly diminished the distance between a bachelor's sitting-room and a lady's boudoir, but he knew the difference between things nice and things ugly; and he had a tolerable idea of making himself comfortable. He sat at breakfast now opposite to Jack. His face beamed with delight; his manner partook of unusual jumpiness at the sight of his

nephew. He fidgetted over him, plying him with things he didn't want, in an access of hospitality.

‘Have some of this omelet, Jack; or have some fish first and omelet afterwards. Don't eat that bread: he'll bring some toast in a minute: you haven't got any butter. I'll get you another plate;’ and he jumped up from the table, knocking his knee against the leg.

Jack cracked an egg leisurely.

‘Don't bother about me: I've got everything I want. Talk about other things.’

‘What sort of things? Where shall I begin?’

‘At the time I left home. What made you go to Australia?’

‘I had nothing to do, and Joe Dagley proposed it.’

‘Was it pure accident your going in the same ship with—Mrs. Dasent?’

‘Not quite. I thought I might be of use,’ said Arthur, with a little hesitation.

‘That was awfully good of you,’ said Jack. ‘And, when you got there, you found him gone. Did you never get the slightest trace of him?’

‘Never. I was there a good long time, and we beat up everywhere. He evidently didn’t mean to show, so I gave it up.’

‘And she?’

‘She said she should go on trying. She meant finding him; and, having gone all that way, she might as well stay there as look anywhere else.’

‘What did you hear of him?’ asked Jack.

‘A bad account. That’s what is so plucky of her. She knows now what a sweep the man is, and yet she won’t drop him until she’s gone to the bottom of it and found out all about him.’

‘Is she pretty well off?’

‘I think so. She got into good lodgings, and, when I left, she was as cheerful as one could expect her to be. She’s a brave woman : never loses her head, and puts a bold front on everything.’

‘Does she believe he is alive?’ asked Jack, presently. ‘I mean, is there any idea of suicide?’

‘I don’t think it ever entered her head,’ said Arthur.

‘Then she may stay like that for ever,’ said Jack, gloomily.

‘I don’t know. She had a great idea that he might have bolted to England. She may turn up here any day. She promised to let me know how she got on, and whether anything happened.’

Jack looked down.

‘It won’t make any difference to me,’ he muttered, ‘till the man has been seen dead.’

Captain Balstoun was glad to change the subject. He made inquiries as to the state of things in Mr. Diggle's house, where Jack was staying. Jack laughed. It was very well, but, with Mr. Diggle's furtive advances on one side, and Aunt Jane's stormy torrents on the other, he found the society of his host and hostess a little trying: he thought perhaps he had better look out for quarters on his own account. Arthur Balstoun jumped at the idea. There was a spare bed-room in the house: Jack must come and occupy it. He was charmed at the prospect, and showed a tendency to run away from his unfinished breakfast to fetch his nephew's luggage. Jack accepted the offer readily, and the matter was settled.

After further hospitable exercises on the Captain's part, Jack was allowed to get into an arm-chair and light a cigarette. He

had, last night, taken his first sight of London life. He had approached it with a fresh mind and vigorous body: consequently, instead of being *blasé* and fatigued, he was full of energy, mental and physical. His aunt had introduced him to a number of people: Agatha had insisted on making him known to some of her particular friends. He was new to the life; had not got the regulation tone of the ball-room knight; but he possessed what many of them lacked—a balance of thought and bearing, the result of having taken life seriously. He might not be able to keep the ball rolling with an unlimited flow of gossip, but he made sensible remarks in an attractive kind of way; and his looks were all in his favour. He had made a good impression, and, more or less unconsciously, he had enjoyed himself.

‘I don’t know that I wasn’t a fool to

come here, Arthur,' he said, presently. 'I shan't be any the better for it. I'm not the sort of fellow to like this life: I haven't the heart to be very lively: I shall only bore and be bored.'

'I am very glad you have come anyhow, old boy,' said Arthur, warmly.

'Well, I felt it wouldn't do to stay alone. I should have been no good for anything after a time. I don't want to be gay, but without a change of scenes and faces one's mind stops working.'

'You needn't be in London always,' said Arthur. 'It's a good thing to come sometimes; but of course you will live at home.'

Jack hesitated.

'It is not very easy to make it up with father: he won't meet one half-way: he isn't sympathetic. By the by, Arthur, why haven't you been to Balstoun?'

Arthur looked uncomfortable: he evidently wished to avoid the subject.

‘I have been in London a good deal this summer,’ he said.

‘But they told me you hadn’t been home since you came back from Australia.’

Arthur admitted the fact.

‘You have not had a row with Sir John?’ asked his nephew, anxiously.

‘Oh, no,’ said Arthur. ‘Not exactly. Perhaps I was unwise: I think I annoyed him.’

‘How was that?’ demanded Jack.

‘I don’t know whether it is worth talking about,’ said Arthur, ‘but you may as well know. I spoke to him about Miss Mirabel.’

‘What had she been doing?’

‘I thought she was taking advantage of her position in Agatha’s absence. I didn’t like John paying her so much attention

One never knows what that sort of thing may end in, and I begged him to be on his guard against her.'

'But, Arthur, you introduced her into the house.'

'Exactly. I feel responsible for the result.'

'But do you know anything against her? You haven't found her out, have you?' Jack asked, with new interest.

'Oh, no. But one can't be too careful. John seems to have taken such a fancy to her, and she makes herself so much at home, that I got frightened: it might end in her persuading him to marry her.'

'Not if I know it,' cried Jack. 'She stopped my game: I'll stop hers. I owe her one; though under the circumstances, I suppose she did right. I used to like her, but I never wanted her for a step-

mother. Do you really think there's a chance of it?'

'I don't know. Your father doesn't do rash things as a rule, but if he once makes up his mind he sticks to it.'

Jack thought for a time.

'I can hardly imagine it,' he said. 'They certainly seem good friends, now I think of it, but I don't believe father can be dreaming of such a thing. At the same time, one knows he isn't incapable of getting married. It would be a dreadful nuisance if he did: I've a mind to go home and keep the peace—disturb it, I mean.'

Arthur had given his nephew what he considered to be a judicious version of the case. He wished to awaken him to a sense of danger, and at the same time make the least of his own past efforts to

thwart it. He had never received any answer from his brother to that protest he had written. On his recent return from abroad he had sent a friendly note, to which the Baronet's reply had been so discouraging that he had decided he should only get into hot water had he ventured to pay a visit; so he had stayed away. Now he had got Jack to recognise the situation, and his anxiety was a little diminished. Jack was evidently impressed; he talked no more of other things, and presently left.

They drove down in the afternoon to the Riverside Club. Jack was not a member, but he must needs become one; he would want to go there sometimes for tea and dinner, even if he did not use it for polo and pony racing. Arthur Balstoun had a phaeton of his own, and they proceeded in great comfort down long uninteresting

thoroughfares towards the fair region which the inhabitants of London so wilfully neglect.

Jack was delighted. 'I did not know there was anything so good as this near London,' he said. 'I never heard it spoken of.'

'Very few people know it exists; nobody ever comes to see it,' said his uncle.

They were crossing Ham Common, with its venerable elm-trees and stretches of green gorse. The forest of Richmond Park loomed blue in the background: here and there came a distant glimpse of Surrey hills; it was country; and beautiful country at that.

'I wonder why not,' said Jack. 'I should come and walk about here if I lived in town.'

'That's just what I do,' said Arthur. 'I've walked all over here. I suppose two hundred years ago it was the fashion: the

king came, and everybody followed. Now I come and nobody follows; that's the difference. There is some of the prettiest country hereabouts that I know—some good old houses too;' and he pointed in one or two directions with his whip.

'It's always the way,' said Jack, 'good things within reach, silly people not taking advantage of them.'

'There's this to be said,' concluded Arthur. 'It isn't everyone's amusement. You and I may like it, but I hardly know another soul I should think of inviting to come here.'

They drove pleasantly along through shady lanes, and Jack proceeded to unfold his intentions to his uncle. He meant to resume his former life, rather under protest.

'Of course I shall never marry now. Some people are constantly in and out of love; I have had all mine at once.'

‘Time enough, Jack, to think that later on.’

‘Don’t say that,’ said Jack, impatiently. ‘It is common cant to say that because I am young I can’t be in earnest, or know my own mind. I know well enough I shall never care for any other woman. It’s not an ordinary case.’

He spoke with the sublime conviction of two-and-twenty: the other forty-eight years or so of his allotted span were only to be the tag-end of a spent career; his experience of life was accomplished. Arthur Balstoun may have entertained reasonable doubts as to the accuracy of his nephew’s forecast, but he knew he was sensitive to ridicule; he refrained from argument, therefore, rather from fear of giving pain than from any sort of conviction.

They reached the club—a great park, with a club-house and pretty grounds—and found a gay crowd scattered about. Some

were watching a game of polo ; some were having tea ; some were talking in quiet corners of the garden. Arthur gave the reins to his groom and led the way towards the polo-ground. Jack had an undoubted inclination to see people, and could not honestly have claimed indifference to the scene before him ; but at the moment it was the polo which attracted him most. He went up to the edge of the ground and watched intently the scampering game. He had not played since he left Cambridge ; he recognised an old Cambridge friend amongst the players, and his excitement became great.

‘ There’s Tommy Browne,’ he exclaimed to his uncle. ‘ I used to play with him at Cambridge ; he had some rare good ponies up there. I say, Spriggins, shall I be able to play here ?’

His uncle was on the point of answer-

ing, when a lady, attended by a man, passed and spoke to him. Jack observed at a glance that she was good-looking and smart, but returned to his game, leaving them to talk apart. Tommy Browne was making a brilliant run straight towards him: Jack watched, enraptured.

‘That’s a goal,’ he exclaimed out loud.
‘Well done, Tommy.’

He was interrupted by Arthur Balstoun, who touched his arm:

‘Jack,’ he said, ‘I want to introduce you to Miss Palliser.’

Jack turned, and found the lady watching him with an amused smile. It was not usual to see young men so easily stirred; he had been absorbed.

‘Do you play polo, Mr. Balstoun?’ she inquired.

‘I have not played for some time: I used to play.’

‘I suppose there wasn’t much room for it where you have been lately?’

Jack started at the question. It was said half-mockingly. Had Arthur been telling tales behind his back? He looked at Miss Palliser, then at his uncle.

‘Oh, no,’ she exclaimed, ‘it wasn’t he. I heard all about you long ago. You went off and lived in a tiny island a hundred miles out at sea, all by yourself, didn’t you?’

‘Not quite that,’ said Jack. ‘It was only a mile or two out, and I had a man with me.’

‘I was told it was a regular desert island, and you were bound to die of privation sooner or later, because you were quite out of reach of everybody.’

‘On the contrary, we were very comfortable.’

‘But what made you go there?’ asked Miss Palliser.

‘I thought I should like to,’ said Jack.

‘And what made you give it up?’

‘Pretty much the same reason,’ answered Jack, quietly.

‘Then you always do what you think you will like?’

‘As long as it doesn’t interfere with other people, yes,’ he replied.

‘We are going to have tea now,’ she went on. ‘Do you think you will like to come too?’

‘Am I not interfering with anyone?’ he asked, keeping up the formula.

‘No,’ she answered, and wondered whether any meaning underlay his smooth speech, for Jack had glanced at her former companion.

They all went towards the house; a comfortable, red-brick dwelling overlooking the river.

‘An ideal place for a busy man who

wished to live out of town,' said Jack, as they drew near.

'An ideal place for idle people who want to live in town,' she answered.

'Probably; but this sort of thing destroys the charm of quietness.'

'I don't know that quietness is so very charming,' she said. 'You seem bent on solitude: I don't think I am very fond of it.'

'When this was far out of town it must have been delightful,' he persisted.

'Now that it is within reach of town,' she replied, 'it is even better.'

They passed through the gardens: tea-tables were studded about—a great crowd of people assembled round them. Miss Palliser knew everybody; he knew no one.

'Isn't this better than your desert island?' she said.

Jack was suddenly conscious of annoy-

ance. He had meant to keep up the character of a recluse; he had been flattered at finding that Miss Palliser had heard of him in that *rôle*, though his fame had been exaggerated. Now he was vexed at feeling himself a stranger. He would have liked to be on a plane with Miss Palliser; not to be treated by her as a beginner. She introduced him to her friend, who had followed with Arthur; and poured out tea. Arthur was restless: upset tea-spoons, and talked too much. Miss Palliser paid him rather scant attention.

‘How are you going back?’ she asked of Jack, presently.

‘With my uncle. He drove me down.’

‘We can give you a lift on our coach, if you like. Can’t we, Major Cruttle?’

Major Cruttle had, apparently, driven a party down. He said he could very well find a place for Jack.

‘But I am going back with my uncle,’ said Jack again. The idea of throwing over Arthur for his new acquaintance had not occurred to him.

‘Oh, very well,’ said Miss Palliser, shortly.

Arthur had gone to another table, where Lady Jane Diggle was having tea: she had made him a sign to come to her.

‘What is the boy doing with that horrible woman?’ she asked, in a loud voice. ‘How did he come across her?’

‘I introduced him,’ said Arthur, in frightened tones.

‘You! What were you thinking of? He couldn’t have begun worse: he oughtn’t to be seen with her.’

‘I couldn’t help it, Lady Jane. She made me do it.’

‘Of course she did. She would make anybody do anything bad and mischievous.

For goodness' sake, Arthur, don't let her get hold of him.'

Arthur made as good an apology as he could, but Lady Jane was full of indignation.

'Get him away; send him over here: say I want to speak to him,' she said.

Arthur went back, and gave his message. Very likely Miss Palliser knew exactly what had happened: she was not incapable of putting two and two together.

'Will you take me to find my father first, Mr. Balstoun?' she said. 'He was a great friend of Sir John's: he would like to know you.'

Jack, being ignorant alike of social wiles and social usages, complied with the request at once. Miss Palliser rose and left Arthur Balstoun, unhappy and confused, alone with Major Cruttle.

'This way will be best, I think,' said

Miss Palliser, putting up her parasol.

Jack looked at her again: she had remarkable eyes, and a still more remarkable complexion; the former very bright, the latter singularly colourless. It was not a beautiful face; much less a thoroughly good face; but there was an unmistakable charm about it. They went a little way in silence.

‘Where is your father?’ he inquired.

‘Over there, at the far end of the garden, I think,’ she said. They walked some way: they had drawn apart from all other people, and nothing confronted them now but a low iron railing giving on to a hayfield. ‘I don’t see him,’ said Miss Palliser. ‘He must have gone. Let us sit in the shade there and rest.’

‘I promised to go and speak to Lady Jane Diggle,’ said Jack, *naïvely*.

‘You are not in a hurry, are you?’ she

said. 'You will find her when we go back. The fact is I want to smoke a cigarette, and one mustn't be seen doing it.'

Jack looked astonished.

'I hope you are not shocked,' she went on. 'It is no longer considered dreadful for women to smoke.'

Jack did object, as a matter of fact, to see women smoking. He would have been sorry, for instance, to see Agatha or Mrs. Dasent with cigarettes in their mouths: he regarded it as essentially a man's occupation. But he had sense enough not to lecture a perfect stranger. They found a seat entirely secluded from view, and here Miss Palliser, taking a cigarette from a small silver case, began to smoke.

'It is absurd,' she said, 'that one should have to hide in order to do this. All those women smoke at home; why shouldn't they do it here?'

‘Do they?’ asked Jack, in unfeigned amazement.

‘Of course they do, but they are hypocrites and don’t like to confess it.’

‘I didn’t know,’ said Jack, simply.

‘They all do everything they oughtn’t to do, and they all pretend they don’t. When one is honest and doesn’t conceal the truth, one is shunned like the plague. A great many people call me all sorts of names, as you know—probably you don’t; anyhow you will soon. It’s only because I’m not a humbug. I don’t see the good of pretending to be better than one really is.’

‘You don’t give yourself a good character,’ said Jack.

‘Better than most people give me,’ she answered.

‘What do they say of you?’ enquired Jack.

Miss Palliser looked into his frank face.

‘Take care I don’t ask you that question in a week’s time. I expect you wouldn’t like to answer it then.’

‘I don’t think I should be afraid,’ said Jack, gallantly.

‘To begin with, there is Lady Jane,’ she went on. ‘She’s a silly old fool: she is full of abuse and knows nothing about me. She once heard me say damn when a man tore my gown at a ball, and told your sister never to speak to me again in consequence. I don’t care: I meant damn:’ and she knocked the ash off her cigarette with a vicious gesture.

Jack began to think he had got into odd company. He began to wonder what his father’s old friend was like, and whether they would find him. Also whether Lady Jane was growing impatient, and whether he ought to go and look for her. Truth to

tell, he had no wish to leave his companion. She was not of the type he was wont to admire, but her unorthodox remarks were made with such entire frankness that they were more amusing than anything else.

‘I am sorry my aunt was shocked,’ he said. ‘Was my sister a friend of yours?’

‘No; but I knew her. She isn’t a hypocrite, Mr. Balstoun. I except her: she really is a dear.’

‘I am glad you say that,’ said Jack.

‘I hate sanctimonious people and I hate goody-goodies, but I do like people like your sister.’

‘There she goes,’ exclaimed Jack, as Agatha appeared on another path. ‘Who is that with her? Morecombe?’

‘I suppose so,’ said Miss Palliser.

‘Why?’

‘They are going to be engaged, I

suppose, aren't they?' said Miss Palliser.

'Agatha and Morecombe!' exclaimed Jack.

'Aren't they?' said Miss Palliser. 'I am very sorry; I took it for granted. They are always together; everyone expects it.'

Jack said nothing, but watched the receding figures. There was nothing preposterous in the idea; it would be a good match; but Morecombe was not a prepossessing fellow externally, and Jack did rather grudge him Agatha. He felt a wish to run after them and ask if it were true.

'Your sister will be a duchess,' said Miss Palliser, 'that's good enough, isn't it?'

'It depends on whether one wants to be a duchess,' said Jack.

'It depends a great deal more on whether some one else wants you to be a duchess: Lady Jane for instance,' said Miss Palliser.

‘You are determined to have your revenge on her,’ said Jack.

‘Oh, that’s not saying anything bad. She would have a good record if that was her only weakness. I’ve done my cigarette ; we can reappear now, and you can go and do your duty.’ Then she added, as an afterthought, ‘I don’t know where my father is ; I must introduce you another time.’

They found Major Cruttle hanging about disconsolately, waiting for Miss Palliser ; and without much ceremony she left Jack and joined him.

Arthur Balstoun was attending Lady Jane to her carriage when Jack arrived. Agatha was delighted to see her brother ; she was looking very fresh and pretty : a strange contrast to the slovenly young man who followed her like her shadow. Lady Jane was in a fury, but Jack had

forgotten all about her. He talked to Agatha until the familiar voice was heard storming from the victoria :

‘ You are keeping me waiting all this time. You don’t seem to have much consideration, Jack ; it seems I am to dance attendance on you.’

‘ My dear Aunt Jane,’ said Jack, going up to the carriage, ‘ I am so sorry. It was quite by an accident that I kept you waiting. I was asked to go and look for somebody. It wouldn’t have taken a minute, only he wasn’t there. Am I too late now ?’

‘ Yes, you are. I don’t want you : go away. I am very angry.’

‘ But why ?’ demanded Jack, in all simplicity. ‘ It wasn’t my fault.’

Lady Jane’s only answer was to speak rather crossly to Agatha—an extreme sign of displeasure—and the carriage

drove off, leaving Jack in a state of bewilderment.

‘Aunt Jane needn’t have been so savage,’ he said to his uncle, as they drove home. ‘She couldn’t have wanted me particularly, and she might have seen that I couldn’t help myself. Miss Palliser says Aunt Jane hates her. It’s very stupid: I think she’s nice.’

Arthur stammered a little.

‘She is rather funny,’ he said.

‘How do you mean funny? She is plain-spoken, that’s all.’

‘She’s supposed to be fast,’ said Arthur, apologetically.

‘That’s because people don’t know her. She isn’t really fast, I’m sure,’ asserted Jack, who had known her something under two hours. ‘Who is her father, by-the-by? She says he was a great friend of father’s.’

‘I suppose they knew each other; I never heard they were friends. He was a Guardsman, and he’s knocked about town all his life. He is a widower with this daughter: he lets her do exactly as she likes, and he does what he likes. I don’t know how he gets on, for he never had any money; but he will be Lord Palliser when his brother dies.’

Jack reflected.

‘I don’t care: I call her a good sort, and I don’t mean to cut her, to please Aunt Jane.’

That night Jack went to a ball and danced with Miss Palliser. As he left her, he met Agatha, who asked him to take her to supper. Her object was to put him on his guard against his new friend.

‘She is not a nice girl,’ said Agatha.

‘Why! what does she do?’ asked Jack.

‘She has no one to look after her,’ an-

swered Agatha, demurely. 'She goes about to all sorts of places by herself; she is noisy and vulgar. I saw her at Sandown the other day with a number of men busy betting for her all the afternoon.'

'They probably made her do it,' said Jack.

'On the contrary, she kept them there: it is not a thing men care about. But she always has a string of them running about after her.'

'Anyone as cheerful and good-looking as she is, naturally would be popular,' said Jack. 'I believe you are jealous, Agatha.'

'I am in earnest,' she answered. 'I know she is attractive: that is the worst of her. They say she can make any man fall in love with her if she chooses; but she will only marry when she thinks she

has caught some one worth having. She treats Major Cruttle disgracefully : she has kept him at her heels for ever so long, and I don't suppose she has the least idea of marrying him. For goodness' sake, dear boy, take care. She is as likely as not to try and catch you : do be wise.'

Jack laughed.

'My dear Agatha, what are you talking about? You might as well be concerned on Christopher Diggle's account. I am not going to fall in love : you forget.'

He uttered this sentiment with sudden gravity. Agatha was anxious not to hurt his feelings.

'I know,' she said ; 'but the very fact of your being indifferent may induce her to hunt you. Be warned in time.'

'Don't be alarmed,' said Jack. 'I am not going to get into any scrapes ; but I can see that you are all prejudiced against

Miss Palliser, and I don't think it is fair. I think she and I are likely to be friends, but I am no more likely to fall in love with her, or with anybody else, than I am to elope with Aunt Jane's cook.'

They went upstairs, and found Aunt Jane ready to go. Jack intended to leave too; but having seen them to their carriage, he altered his mind. He returned to the ball-room and danced again with Miss Palliser—as a protest, presumably, against the conduct of his relatives.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.



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